

UC Riverside

UC Riverside Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

House Secrets

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8rb3z5ns>

Author

Kriesel, Darlene

Publication Date

2012

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

House Secrets

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Darlene Theresa Kriesel

September 2012

Thesis Committee:
Mary Otis, Co-Chairperson
Susan Straight, Co-Chairperson
Tod Goldberg

Copyright by
Darlene Theresa Kriesel
2012

The Thesis of Darlene Theresa Kriesel is approved:

Committee Co-Chairperson

Committee Co-Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

Chapter 1

October 1967

Sophie turned onto her side and tried to sink deep into her mattress to disappear into her favorite dream, the one where ten-year-old daughters in white gowns flew beside their beautiful mothers across the sky. Sophie loved the sky. Back at her old house, it was so blue and its curvy streaks of white so fancy, she thought God had painted it to show off his talents just for her. In her old yard, she would tilt her head back and spin around like a windmill till she could barely stand, and the streaks of white above swirled like spoon-stirred vanilla ice cream. Simon would spin too, even though he was too little to last as long as she and would fall on the ground under the big shade tree, grab at the dirt and laugh about how the ground was moving. At her old house, with Grandma Ella, her daddy and Simon, and even her momma, Sophie liked making herself dizzy.

That house in the country seemed like a million miles from the one she lived in now. It felt far away, even though before Sophie left, Grandma Ella had told her it was only five miles between the two, and she would still be going to the same school.

A spring from the hand-me-down mattress dug into her side, keeping her awake. Her flannel nightgown twisted and rose to her waist. It itched, like little ants were crawling all over her. Her momma said she had to wear it for a week from Friday to Friday until it was time to do the wash. It was only Saturday. Her head was damp against her pillow, even though there was an after Halloween coolness in the air. Her momma's voice, her friend's laughter, the clink of quarters and nickels on the kitchen table, and the song about hearing something through a grapevine spun in Sophie's head.

Sophie reached under her pillow and touched the nickel her daddy gave her the last day of fourth grade. Certain things from that day, Sophie remembered more clearly than others walking like a mule as Arkansas' June heat made her back sweat, up the cracked sidewalk to the red-brick house her granddaddy built — the light-feathery feeling she had as she waited for her daddy to walk through their gate that evening and the fear mixed with confusion she felt when her momma almost slammed her bowl of beans in front of her at dinner. There was a strange buzz in her ears and the head on the nickel she held started to blur from the tears she tried to blink away when her momma said, "Your daddy's not coming home, ever, and it's your fault." The bowl jittered an ugly beat like it was some kind of drum before it was still and just a bowl, again. The steam from the beans drifted and stung Sophie's bowed forehead. Simon sat stiff as a piece of wood next to her.

The doorknob clicked once and then again, clicking her out of last summer's memory to what was real in the dark. Her momma slid into her room. She was mostly a shadow except for the hallway light that seemed to make her eyes glow. Sophie crossed her arms over her chest to try to stop it from beating so loud and so fast.

Sometimes, on nights like these, Sophie pictured Grandma Ella. She pictured her soft brown dimpled cheeks, her tightly curled hairdo that Ms. Mabel fixed every two weeks, and her dark, heavy-lidded eyes that stayed constant and honest as the words she spoke. Grandma in a room was like a ladybug landing on Sophie's finger. Her touch on top of Sophie's head, her smile at Sophie's stories, her voice that gave her good advice,

or told her when she did wrong, landed softly on Sophie, made her feel like life was fine and steady.

Sophie couldn't explain her momma, Rebie. Once, in kindergarten, she lifted her hip from the floor and stuck her hand up as high as she could so her teacher could see that she wanted to be at the paint station that day. Once she got her wish, her teacher saw she wasn't painting anything and said "I think it would be nice if you painted your momma, Sophie." Sophie started with the blue paint and brushed a heavy, wet circle for her momma's head. When she tried to picture the rest of her momma she couldn't. She stood for a minute waiting for something. No feeling, no picture came. She grabbed both paint brushes and clenched them like when she first held a pencil the wrong way and sunk one paint brush in the red can, the other in the black and made a mess splashing the paints all over the paper, inside the circle, outside the circle. Then she plunged the brushes in the blue and gray paint and did the same thing. Paint was everywhere, on her face, her hands her smock and the floor. "Sophie, Sophie!" Her teacher was yelling her name. When her teacher guided her to the sink to wash up, she felt her chest jump up and down from the sobs she hadn't realized were hers.

Simon wasn't wild. He was her little brother. He was there then and he was here now. His mocha-colored eyes, his cotton candy hair that looked like it had been dipped in the sunset, his high booty, and lanky limbs made him a little picture of their daddy. In church, on Sundays, Sophie thanked God for Simon.

Now, her mother's slippers flip-flopped toward her. She shuddered. Sometimes, on nights like these, it was hard for Sophie to picture her grandma, or the old house. So,

she would make up songs, strong songs she called them. She was the sassafras tree in her backyard tonight. She pretended that if she was as still as a tree trunk, maybe then her momma wouldn't bother her.

*I'm a tree trunk with no heart.
I'm a tree trunk with no heart.
I can lie still in the dark -
till the morning. I'm so smart.*

The flip-flop of her momma's slippers stopped at Sophie's bedside. Out of the slits in her eyes, she could see her momma's shadow standing like a black bear over her. Sophie tried to stare her momma's meaty hands into staying where they were.

"Get up, girl. What are you doing at that door listening to grown folks conversation?"

I'm a tree trunk. I'm a tree trunk.

"Always trying to be grown!"

Sophie hated the stinky breath, the scary slurs in her momma's voice, the proof that her momma had turned into an animal. Her momma grabbed Sophie's two ponytails, and yanked her body to the floor. Sophie clutched the side of her head to stop it from pounding. In her hands, the hallway light showed brown mixed with red strands of hair. Her eyes began to sting, and fresh tears flowed free.

Sophie hadn't stared long enough at those hands. One came down hard, like a bear claw and dug into Sophie's face. Sophie threw her face in her hands to stop the burning and felt the blood on her brow.

"Momma no! Momma no! I wasn't listening. I was lying down, 'sleep. I promise, I promise."

“Don’t talk back to me.” Her momma’s voice was thick. “Do as you’re told and you won’t get in trouble.” She walked out of the room and closed the door, leaving Sophie alone in the midnight darkness.

Sophie crawled into bed, her face still wet with her tears. She wiped her brow on her faded rose print pillowcase she’d had since the old house. She brushed her brow one more time before lying on her side wishing her momma didn’t hate her. She grabbed for her coin; it made a quiet clink behind her bed. She’d get it, tomorrow. One day, if she rubbed it enough, she knew she’d remember what she did to make her daddy leave. She rocked back and forth and thought of Simon. Had he heard anything this time? There in the dark, with the faded, painted roses under her head, she thought of summertime, the sun, and that day when her daddy would show up, swing her around, and her momma would love her, again.

Chapter 2

Trees were turning from ugly gray-brown skeletons to the leafy protective things that Sophie loved to climb and make wishes in. The green dust from them was beginning to gather on the ground and in little tufts on the tops of cars. Simon had started scratching at his nose, and sucking in air at the back of his throat. This time of year, Sophie was always telling him to stop snorting, to whom he would answer, “What’d I do.” Sophie wrote April 2, 1968 at the top right corner of her lined paper--just the way her fifth grade teacher Ms. Rice liked. She thought if she did everything just right, maybe her daddy would be home after school. A surprise. She pictured a big red balloon and a Baby Fun doll in his arms that were stretched out toward her-- her momma must’ve forgotten her birthday because she hadn’t said anything in the morning before she and Simon got on the bus. She would do all of her classwork, answer all of Ms. Rice’s questions, and act real nice to even the mean girls at recess. Today--at least today--if she was perfect, there also wouldn’t be whispers told behind her back or to her face about what had happened to her daddy the summer before.

Mr. Davis, the Starks City Elementary School principal, stopped Sophie on the way out the double doors to recess.

“Hey, Ms. Sophie.”

“Yes, sir?” Sophie stared down at shining floors, then past Principal Davis at the red brick wall behind him. She tried to think about what she might have done to have him call her Ms. Sophie.

“How you doing today?” he said.

“Good.” Sophie watched to see if Principal Davis would pull up on his britches twice, around his big stomach, or rub his chin hairs. Pulling on the britches twice meant that she wasn’t in trouble. If he rubbed his chin, he was serious.

“What grade you in now, Ms. Sophie?” He kept his hands behind his back.

“The fifth.” Sophie glanced at the group of girls near the pile of jump ropes to see if Linda was grabbing one.

“That right?” He rubbed his chin and Sophie flinched. “You getting big, and you turning into a pretty little girl. I knew yo’ momma when she was yo’ age.”

“Yes, sir?” Sophie said. She wondered why some men’s eyes behind the brown or black was more yellow than white, like hers. Mr. Davis’ had yellow eyes.

“You got yo’ momma’s big cheeks. But them dark eyes got that Brown sparkle. Like yo’ Grandma Ella and yo...” He paused. “Yeah, the Brown’s.” Mr. Davis had been leaning on one of the double doors, holding it part-way open. “Come on out, Sophie. I don’t plan to keep you yo’ whole recess.” Sophie breathed out hard and realized she had held her breath, waiting for the name Mr. Davis didn’t say. Her daddy’s name. The door slammed behind them. Finally, they weren’t half-way inside and half-way outside. Sophie welcomed the feel of the warm sun on her face. Boys shouted for a football. She could hear some of her friends clapping to the “Rockin Robin” song. Linda was in the middle of “Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear” as she jumped rope with the Cooper twins. Mr. Davis’ black dress shoes made a popcorn crunch noise on the blacktop. Just for a second,

Sophie remembered she and Simon laughing and eating popcorn from the big white plastic bowl in front of the TV at Grandma Ella's.

“Some of these kids don't have no sparkle in they eyes, Sophie. Look like they don't notice nothing around them.” He put his hands in his pockets, but pulled them out quick like they didn't really fit. “Too much changing here in the South for you kids not to pay attention, Sophie.” He put his fist to his mouth and cleared his throat. “Hold up for a minute.”

Sophie thought she'd pee her pants. What did Principal Davis want, really? She stopped and looked up at him. He didn't turn to face her, but his voice was so deep and each word so slow, it seemed like his words were alive inside her head.

“Sophie, I can tell you a thinker. I can tell you notice thangs. And when you notice thangs ain't right--tell somebody. If you just feel something ain't right--tell somebody. These days, we tell. Ain't no mo' just shuttin' up when wrong is prancing and pricking at you from all sides. It's just, well, it's just, you got to know who to tell. Some in yo' family was bold like I'm telling you to be, but they didn't know who to tell. If you ever unsure about who you can trust, trust me, Ms. Sophie.”

“Yes, sir. Can I go play, now, sir?”

“Go on, get,” Mr. Davis said.

Sophie ran over to the jump ropes where she had told Linda to meet her. She wasn't really surprised Principal Davis knew something about her family, because that's how Starks City was. It seemed like the grown folks she'd see when she was with her momma, at the store, or who'd she'd see at church always knew her, her momma, her

momma's momma and daddy, and on down the line. The kids she knew pretended to know as much. Lately, though, the grown folks had stopped looking her in the eye; they didn't say more than "Hey Sophie" to her, until today when Mr. Davis stopped her. "*Tell somebody*" he'd said. Her momma told her not to tell nobody nothing that goes on in their house. She guessed he probably wasn't talking about that stuff. She'd be sure to tell him if Mean Willy tried to pull down her pants again, because he was nasty.

"Sophie, girl! What was old Mr. Davis talking to you so long about?" Linda came running toward Sophie. They clasped hands and skipped back over to the jump rope.

"He just told me to make sure I tell him if somebody's messin' with me."

"We learned that at the assembly at the start of the year." Linda changed her voice to mimic Mr. Davis. "Be sure you tell me or your teacher if anyone is picking on you. We are here to make sure you children are safe." Sophie and Linda laughed. "Does that include him and the teacher when they get that paddle and whip our ass for wanting to go pee when it's not recess or lunch?" Linda laughed. "Come on, let's play jump rope," she said.

Angela and Renee, the green-eyed Cooper twins were swinging the jump rope. All the kids knew they had a daddy at home, but then, Linda had told Sophie that once when she was coming down the hall from the bathroom, and passed Principal Davis' office open door, she'd heard Renee call Principal Davis daddy. There were hardly any kids around. One day, with her own ears, Sophie heard Angela say it, too. Sophie was walking back to class from the nurse after she'd told Ms. Rice she had a stomachache. Angela almost knocked her over trying to open the principal's door. Apparently, she'd

gotten a good grade on a spelling test. She pushed by Sophie like she didn't really see her. She burst the door open saying, "Daddy, daddy!" But then she put her hand over her mouth. "I mean Mr. Davis, I got an 'A' on my spelling test."

"Watch yo' mouth, little girl," was all he said.

To Sophie, it seemed like Angela held her head down when she walked away.

The two girls turned the jump rope and Sophie rocked back and forth with her hands in the air until she found her rhythm and jumped in. "Go ahead, Sophie, go ahead." Linda chanted as she rocked back and forth with Sophie. Sophie jumped as the rope whipped an even tempo each time it hit the blacktop. Sophie, Linda, Angela and Renee started singing the Cinderella chant. "*Cinderella dressed in yella', went upstairs to kiss her fella, made a mistake she kissed a snake, how many doctors will it take?*" They all started to sing the chorus a second time, but this time the twins changed the words. "*Cinderella dressed in a gown, went upstairs to find her crown. When she came down, her daddy'd left the town; how many tears will fall to the ground?*" Sophie burned her hands trying to grab the rope from the twins, but they wouldn't let go of the ends. Linda grabbed one of Angela's pigtails and pushed her to the ground. Ms Jones, the yard-duty teacher with the mustache and deep voice, stepped in, sent Linda to the office and told the twins and Sophie to scatter before they got in trouble, too.

"Get out your math books and your math notebooks, girls and boys," Ms. Rice said.

Sophie wanted to take the twins' faces and smash them together ten times, then make them lick the blood from the other's wounds. She wanted to do like she'd heard

somebody was going to do to a baby in the Bible-- hold each one upside down by the foot and slice their body in half. They had ruined her birthday. She knew school would be out after math and choir, and she tried to picture her daddy holding her birthday balloon, but all that would come to her mind, so loud and so clear that she had to press on the side of her head to try to stop them, were the words from the playground. It was as if the twins, with their jump rope, had crammed into a tight space inside of Sophie's mind, just to tease her with their nasty song over and over again.

"Sophie, Sophie Brown?" Ms. Rice was calling her. "Get your work out, little miss." She was standing over Sophie's desk. Sophie hadn't heard her usual Swisha, Swisha, her thighs made as she walked. She smelled like sweet almonds.

"Yes, ma'am." Sophie did as she was told. She loved Ms. Rice's smell. She tried to listen to her lesson on multiplying fractions. "*When she came down, her daddy'd left town, how many tears will fall to the ground?*"

Just as she thought, there was nothing for her when she got home. No daddy, no presents, no celebration. The best gift she got was her momma didn't whip her for being bad. She hated the twins with their two daddies and their green cat eyes. After dinner, and after she had run Simon's bath water, she went to her room, turned on her little lamp on her old wood desk, and got out her math homework. She couldn't get the twins and their song out of her head. She copied one of the equations she was supposed to do for her homework. Instead of solving it, she turned the numbers into stick figures of the twins and drew long lines attached to their necks and hung them to beautiful, leafy trees.

Sophie lay in her bed Friday morning remembering another morning, about a year before, at her old house when she and Simon crawled into their daddy's bright blue pickup truck where they could barely see over the front dash. A slow blues song with guitar notes that sounded like sad words blared as soon as her daddy turned over the engine. He hummed to his blues and drove down to the end of the dead-end gravel road in front of their house. When he turned right, Sophie knew they were headed for the park by the Arkansas River. Sophie watched Mr. Green's pig farm pass by and the little white Baptist church with the brown door that stood way back off the road. The park was on the right. It seemed like a forest to Sophie, the way it sat in the open country, full of huge trees that all seemed to lean toward the river. "We going to take a walk," her daddy said. Sophie and Simon jumped out of the truck. Simon brushed the front of his pants, like he'd just seen his daddy do. Sophie's daddy nodded toward the park's endless green in front of them. He took a deep breath and looked around. "Yep, a beautiful day. Walking's exercise and the best way to get rid of the bad stuff inside of you and make room for life's goodness." When they got to the river's edge, he skipped a rock with ease on the surface of the water. Simon tried to follow his lead. "That's it, Simon. Next time, I bet you can make the rock skip instead of plop straight down into the water." He laughed loud and free, the way he always did when he was at the park with them.

"Watch this, Daddy!" Simon hurried to pick a new rock, leaned back, and raised his hand high over his head and threw the next one. There was a plunk right next to where his last rock had landed. "Is that good, daddy?" Simon said. He wiped his hands to show his satisfaction at his imagined skill.

“Pretty good, little man, pretty good,” her daddy said. “Now, Sophie, you make a wish every time one of my rocks hits a lily-pad,” he said. “What you wish for is up to you, don’t tell me.” He threw a rock and Sophie held her breath, hoping the rock would plop on the pad which would send it a little further down the river and she could make her wish.

Sophie imagined folding these memories of her father into little origami shapes and saving them inside her mind as she lay on her back and the daylight peeked from behind the pulled shades in her room. Only this memory was making Sophie squinch up her eyes so she could only see darkness. She was mad at herself for not wishing that nothing bad would ever happen to her daddy, rather than wishing for a dumb red dress that day, almost a year ago. The familiar sound of her momma’s slippers made its way to her room that morning, interrupting her thoughts.

Her momma pushed Sophie’s bedroom door open. “Get up for school,” she said. She peeked into her room, her hair wrapped in a scarf and hair rollers. “By the way, they killed Dr. King last night. All over the papers and the news.” Her momma stood in the doorway longer than she usually did. She tapped on the door. Sophie didn’t remember her momma ever tapping on her door. Then she looked at Sophie like she would say something else. Sophie held her breath and waited. Her momma tapped on the door again, paused, then left the room.

Usually when the sun began to burn through what was left of the dawn grayness, Sophie wanted to get out of bed. The sooner she got dressed and ate her breakfast, the sooner she could get out of the house, to the bus stop, away from her momma. But, now

she squinched her eyes shut again, and let her momma's words with such a quick and heavy sadness, it was like they had the power of a witch's spell. Dr. Martin Luther King who was always saying speeches that sounded like church songs was gone? Speeches about making schools and restaurants better for black people. Sophie loved him. It didn't matter that she'd heard some teenagers in the grocery store and outside of her school as she waited on the bus say he was an Uncle Tom who agreed too much with white people and who wouldn't fight them back when he needed to. She just blocked what they said out of her mind. Those types of teenagers were always complaining about everything, anyway. She could hardly imagine not seeing him on the T.V. anymore, or hearing the news people say what he was doing everyday. He was better than Superman to her, it seemed like he knew the good things about the future when he talked and made everybody else know it, too.

That day at school, Sophie didn't feel like eating, but everybody had to get in the lunch line, no matter if they wanted to or not. One of the lunch ladies with a white smock and black net cap over her head dumped a big spoonful of string beans on her lunch tray. Mean Willy, who was, unfortunately, behind Sophie, whispered in her ear. "Yo daddy is the one that shot Martin Luther King. He going to jail, and ain't ever coming home." Sophie hands trembled, and she almost dropped her tray. "Shut up, ugly!" was her only comeback. She stared at her green beans. Her daddy was a good man. He would never hurt anybody, especially not Dr. King.

"It's true and everybody knows it," Mean Willy said.

Sophie couldn't wait to get away from Willy. Then she could forget about his mean lie. She couldn't wait to tell Linda what a jerk Willie was. Linda would tell her not to believe Willie and she'd remind her of what she already knew, that her daddy would never do that to anybody. If he did hurt somebody like Dr. King, it would have been because it was an accident.

Sophie found a seat at a table in the furthest back corner of the lunchroom, just to the left of the double-doors that led out to the front of the school. The several rows of long benches in front of her, then the covered piano in the front of the room and the stage it faced made the lunchroom the multi-purpose room for the school during the rest of the year. Now, like at most of the assemblies, it was too large and too noisy with kids' voices echoing through it worse than the hundreds of noises at a carnival. This was her favorite spot on days like these when she felt bad about something. Like the time she was afraid to go home because her momma promised she was going to get it when she got there for not cleaning the three spilled drops of milk left on the kitchen table that morning. Or like the time during first recess when Linda and her split up because Linda decided to play basketball, and Sophie thought she would go and play jump rope. As she ran across the grass, on the way to the blacktop, four girls she really didn't know ran behind her, teasing her about her old-fashioned shoes and how their grandma's had different colored pairs just like them. On those days, she felt alone and picked on. On those days, she thought God must be too busy to deal with her little problems and feelings. On this day, she felt God had to be too busy to deal with her because he had to deal with all the other people who were sad over Dr. King and of course, he must be thinking of a punishment for the

killer. She suddenly startled herself. She wondered if God had heard what Willy said about her daddy? What if God believed Willy? She didn't want her daddy to get the real killer's punishment. No, she thought. God knows Willie is stupid. He's probably tracking the killer down, getting ready to have him crash his car into a tree or the river, or something. She forked at her string beans and groaned at the mashed potatoes. Simon slid beside her just then. "So', why you by yourself?" he said.

"Hey! What you doing at my lunch, Simon?"

He scooted closer and started eating her pizza. "The principal, he's going to talk about Dr. King in the assembly, so our teacher told us we was supposed to eat now." He peeled off a piece of pizza and chewed with his mouth open. "So', why they shoot Dr. King. He was a nice man, right?"

"Eat it all, but close your mouth when you eat, boy." She pushed the whole tray in front of Simon. "I guess Principal Davis going to talk about why he got shot." Sophie lay her head on her outstretched arm. The lunch table felt cool against it. She watched Simon lick his fingers of red sauce. It always amazed her how, no matter what was going on, Simon could always eat.

"We didn't do spelling in the morning, like normal. And for Social Studies, we just talked about what happened. My teacher acted like she was about to cry. She started sniffin' and breathing in all hard. She said now that Dr. King was gone, black people lost our best chance to win some war." Simon munched on the pizza crust. "So', what war is she talking about?"

Sophie only had a feeling about what Simon's teacher might have been talking about. A war? She knew wars were between big countries. She knew that people died in them. But who made up wars as a way to fixing anything, she couldn't figure out. It seemed, just like the big fights on the playground, the problem was fixable without hitting, but some boy or girl would keep talking and talking until the other person would get so mad, they would hit back. If Dr. King was in a war, maybe he talked too much. Maybe if he would have just kept his thoughts to himself, he would still be alive.

She sat up and shook her arm that was trying to go to sleep. "I think Dr. King was in a war, Simon. I just don't get exactly who he was fighting against and why, if he was the good guy, why he had to die."

Chapter 3

June 1968

Before nine o'clock on summer days, Sophie felt hopeful that the house would be quiet. She left the shade pulled down on the big square window that faced her bed and closed her bedroom door. No smoke floating in the hallway from her momma's cigarette and the fact that the only thing she could hear was the hum from the refrigerator hinted that she was the only one awake. She wouldn't have to be afraid to walk past her momma in the living room where she usually sat with her cigarette and coffee every morning, worried she might yell at her for making too much noise or getting up too early or too late. For now, Sophie's only concern was if the sun hadn't stolen the kitchen's coolness so she could enjoy her ice-cold milk and cornflakes in complete luxury. She placed her little feast on the table when Simon hurried into the kitchen like a cat who just heard the pop of a tuna can open.

"Is that mine?" Simon said.

"Get your own." Sophie almost flinched, but controlled herself so Simon wouldn't think he startled her. "You know Momma said you have to get your own cereal now. You already seven years old."

Simon stepped in front of Sophie. "Oh, come on Sophie, make it for me. You do it better than me. I always spill." Simon's round eyes begged for Sophie's help.

"You have to get it yourself," Sophie said.

He stomped once on the floor. "Fine, I won't let you play with my army men anymore. You too mean."

“I’m not mean, you’re spoiled. I’ll get your bowl, you pour your cereal, and I’ll pour your milk.” She grabbed a bowl from the cupboard. “Besides, if you don’t let me play with your army men, you can’t play in the neighborhood I’m building outside. So you might as well quit telling that tale. Just make your food so we can go play. Plus, I’ll tell you more secrets once we get outside if you act right.” Sophie set his bowl on the table.

Simon smiled a slow, crooked grin and poured his cereal. Sophie knew he loved her secrets, even if he wasn’t sure if they were real or make-believe.

Sophie opened the back door, and felt the hot humid rush of the day. The morning sky was painted with white pillows and lambs. She jumped off the three large steps to lose herself in her backyard. With Simon at her heels, Sophie made her way over to the sassafras tree that stood in the middle of the yard.

“Simon, get your toys out the basket over there by the steps.”

He ran to a red wastepaper basket beside the steps. He lifted the lid, removed it and retrieved various G.I. Joes, Hot-wheels, and Matchbox cars. These he bundled in his folded arms and carried them against his chest. Under the tree, he opened his arms, and his booty clattered to the ground. He grinned at his success.

Sophie set two bedroom U-haul boxes side-by-side, faced the openings outward and covered them with her dolls’ patchwork blankets for rooftops. She pulled overgrown grass from behind their shed and planted it inside the floor of the boxes. Stacked popsicle-sticks turned into neighborhood houses. Her work was like the dioramas she had made at school. Instead of plastic dinosaurs and lizards, there were houses and green

lawns where G.I. Joes, Barbies, and Kens lived. When she put the last doll in its place she stood and put her hands on her hips.

“There. That’s our street. What do you want the name of the street to be Simon?”

“Um I don’t know, maybe...”

Sophie watched Simon combing the flowers in the backyard. He stopped by the butterfly weed and larkspur, names which he'd always jumbled into "flutterby" and "larksbird." His gaze finally stopped at the corner of the backyard, at a clump of poison oak, a wild runaway patch missed by Rebie’s weekly bleachings.

“Hey, So, let’s call it Poison Oak. Just kidding.”

“That’s funny, Simon. Poison oak. Who would call a street Poison Oak?”

“I would name Ms. Spencer’s street Poison Oak ‘cause she looks like she has it all the time.” Simon gave a slight nod of his head. “Look, Sophie, there she is.”

Ms. Spencer, the neighbor who lived on the street behind the children’s house appeared on her back porch with a watering bucket. She had a rash on her face, which was there most of the year but seemed more apparent in the spring. Simon and Sophie giggled as they watched her bend over and water her flowers.

“She needs to quit letting that water run over into that poison oak. She’s just making it grow faster,” Sophie said.

Ms. Spencer paused and stared toward the sound of the children’s whispers.

“That must be why she has all those bumps on her face all the time,” Simon said.

She watered till the middle row of flowers. Then as if a whistle blew for her to leave, Ms. Spencer scurried back into her house, dropping the watering pot next to her

back steps with a clank, not looking to see where it fell. Sophie and Simon smiled at each other.

A sassafras berry fell onto Simon's shoulder. He looked up.

"I'll call it Big Tree Lane! Yeah. That's what I'll call it." He stood as straight and proud as he could, as if he was the tree.

"I like that name. Sophie paused. "It sounds strong. Nobody will mess with folks that live on Big Tree. Good choice, little brother."

"That's a good name, So?"

"Yep, that sounds good Simon."

Sophie sat Indian-style under the tree, pleased with her neighborhood. Her gaze drifted to Simon's eyes. She thought about how their shape and color looked reminded her of her daddy's a little, but mostly her momma's . How could two people with the same eyes be so different? Simon's eyes followed Sophie wherever she went; her mother's eyes turned away whenever Sophie tried to get near – one she gave love to the way she wanted to receive from the other.

It was time to play dolls so Sophie called Simon over to give him instructions.

"Okay Simon. I'm Matilda. You're Ms. Teenie. Got it?"

"I got it, So. Watch you'll see."

"Hey, Ms. Teenie, it's Matilda. What you up to on this fine Sunday afternoon?"

Sophie sat her doll down on the play porch. "By the looks of your face, you'd think you've been to heaven and back. You been to church?"

“Hey, yourself!” Simon gave his voice a soprano lilt. “Not church; I just went to the river. It’s better than church. I can play in the water at the river.” Simon added in his regular voice, “Church really is boring, So.”

“Simon, I’m not So. Right now, I’m Matilda!” Sophie shook her doll’s head in front of Simon. “Play right.”

“Okay, okay,” Simon said and set his doll back in position. “I always have to go to the bathroom. But the preacher gets mad if I get up.” Simon air-rocked his doll on a make-believe rocking chair.

“Ms. Teenie, you so funny.” Matilda said. “You always seem so happy. I bet it’s because you don’t have big problems in your life, like bad kids. Mine are always in my way. It seems like I can’t think past the second in front of me.”

“Matilda, I think real fast. I can add and subtract faster than all my friends. Um, why would kids stop you from thinking?”

“Well, I’ll tell you a secret Ms. Teenie.” Sophie moved the doll till its head touched the other. “When I was little my momma told me that little kids drive grown people crazy, makes them not even able to talk straight some time. She says kids are a grown person’s prison because they put chains on their hearts. I didn’t know what she meant, though.”

“I don’t know what that means either, but prison sounds dark and I think you don’t eat in there,” said Ms. Teenie.

“Whenever that little girl of mine asks me questions with a big old gleam in her eye that I can’t answer, I get mad.” The doll jumped with Sophie’s help. “I don’t know

why kids have to ask so many questions? Most of the time she asks stuff like, ‘Why is the sky blue, and is the ocean blue too or is it because of the sky?’ It’s so worrisome. I mean they can’t be happy with God created the heavens and the earth and that’s that?”

Clouds colored the white lambs and pillows grey. Sophie ignored the change.

Matilda continued, “But you know the questions that really bother me are the ones I just can’t answer. The kids might ask ‘What’s wrong momma? Why are you looking out of the window like that?’ Now I might not even have known they were watching me at the time, or maybe I was trying to remember stuff from long time ago. Oh I get mad those times for sure. Ms. Teenie, want to know another secret?”

“Yeah, Matilda.” Simon’s doll rocked harder.

“My momma use’ to tell me, kids are thieves of a momma’s own thoughts,”

“What does that mean, Matilda?” Ms. Teenie asked.

“I don’t know, that’s why it’s still a secret, but when I figure it out I’ll let you know.”

“Matilda, I think you should take your kids to McDonald’s, and buy them a ice cream cone, and sing *Little John* with them. They would like that.”

“Sophie!” Her momma’s voice was like the first thud of thunder in a storm.

“Sophie! You and Simon come in this house before you get rained on.”

Sophie wiped her forehead of new raindrops.

“Yes, ma’am,” Sophie said. “Come on Simon, let’s clean up, quick. Let’s just get the dolls and the blankets. Leave the other stuff so we don’t have to rebuild everything tomorrow.”

“What about the boxes, won’t they get wet, So?”

“Just come on Simon, Momma’s going to get mad.”

They grabbed dolls, blankets, and cars, and put them in the red pail.

“We’ll play again soon. Okay, Simon?”

“Okay, Sophie. That was fun, huh?”

“Yeah, Simon, that was fun.”

In the living room, Sophie’s momma sat on her avocado-colored throne, her legs outstretched, painted toes wiggling toward the ceiling. She looks so *comfortable*, Sophie thought. Her mother leaned her back against the arm of the sofa and turned just enough to view her morning television programs.

“Sophie, go get the comb and brush so I can do your hair. Bring the grease too.”

“Yes, ma’am.” She was back in a minute with comb, brush, and hair grease. She sat between her mother’s knees on a pillow on the floor. A voice from the television yelled, “Come on down, you’re the next contestant on the *Price is Right!*”

Her momma parted her hair with the tip of the comb, she smoothed the cool grease on her scalp. She combed, brushed and braided Sophie’s hair with expert, sturdy fingers. She braided each plait to the hair’s end so the hair would stay put.

Sophie felt an itch on her left leg.

Oh God! If I move, Momma’ll get mad. It’ll go away.

The itch started to feel like a pinch. Sophie reached her hand out and scratched her leg.

“Be still before I pop you with this brush, girl.” Sophie held her breath hoping she would not feel the brush meet the top of her head. The hair-combing ritual continued in silence until the phone, on the end table, rang. “Hello. Oh hey, Sheila. What are you up to today?”

“No girl, I’m not doing anything. Just combing this girl’s hair, trying to get it over and done with.”

Her momma talked about how humid it was outside, the way she always did with Ms. Sheila, in the summer. She said something or someone was no good, and wouldn’t ever be a part of her life. Her momma laughed some and told the same story about how her dress got caught in the fence when she, Ms. Sheila, and all the kids were running in the park last summer to catch the ice cream man.

“Remember that, Sheila?” She laughed big. “I got stopped mid-tracks and fell with my hands flat on the ground and my behind straight up in the air.” She laughed again. “Ole Tommy boy was looking so far up my leg, you would’ve thought he had lost some gold coins up there.”

Sophie pulled on her fingers, crossed and uncrossed her legs. She wondered why others received the gift of her mother’s jokes and laughter.

Her momma must have hung up the phone while Sophie was lost in her thoughts.

Pop! The hard plastic brush landed on top of her head, bringing hot tears.

“I told you not to move. Didn’t I?”

“Yes, ma’am. I mean no, ma’am, I didn’t move.” Sophie tried to detach her pulsing head from the rest of her body to tolerate the pain. “You moved when you hung the phone up.”

Had she said that out loud? Sophie surprised herself.

Her momma continued braiding and parting but with so much force, Sophie’s head began to feel as if it were a tetherball being knocked tight around a pole. She pleaded to God to keep her head from exploding and forcing her to yell out.

The Price is Right was almost over and her momma was just about done with Sophie’s hair. The ritual went as most had, Sophie afraid to speak or to move and her momma ready to react to any move Sophie made. Sophie wanted to tell her mother how she heard Simon crying in his room the night before. She wanted to tell her she thought he was crying because he wanted to know about his daddy, where he was, and when he was coming home.

Simon rushed into the living room and stopped in front of Sophie.

“Boy, what is wrong with you?” Her momma’s grip on Sophie’s last braid tightened.

“I was watching Bugs Bunny, and he just squished Elmer Fudd, and his blood was all in his hand.” Sophie smiled at Simon’s innocence.

“Boy, you better get out of here with that cartoon mess.” Rebie twisted on the lid of the grease jar.

“When I started watching it, I was happy, now I’m sad.”

“Why in the hell you think you supposed to be happy? Boy, if you don’t get out of here, you better.”

Sophie fists had been closed. She opened them now, slow, like a budding morning glory. She imagined for a second that the lines on them were roads to somewhere. Her right index finger began to trace the thickest line on the inside of her left palm; she imagined that road led to her father’s door.

“Summer is like a rubber band that stretches forever, Simon.” Sophie and Simon sat on the back porch one morning after breakfast. Sophie leaned over and sketched an invisible line on the step with a twig. “It is taking a long time to end.” Simon said. “I hate when I pull a rubber-band and it pops back and hits me on my finger. It hurts.” Simon pretended to stretch and release a rubberband with his fingers.

“Yeah, well I want summer to pop back and turn into school time. That’s probably when daddy’ll come back.” Sophie continued to sketch on the concrete step. Simon looked at her but said nothing.

Sophie and Simon slugged through muggy summer days. Days that were worse this summer than the one before. Sophie had heard her momma tell someone on the phone that Ms. Hattie at the beauty shop said to stay home for a few weeks. Ms. Hattie was closing shop till she got back from Mississippi where she was visiting kinfolk. Sophie didn’t think anything of it until she realized her momma would be home all day until 6:00 when she drove to take care of Grandma Cora, across town. Now, instead of being free to move around the house, Sophie had to always have an ear out for where her momma was. She and Simon played in the backyard under the sassafras tree in the

mornings. When her momma called her in to get her hair combed, Sophie and Simon moved with a quickness back inside. In the afternoons she knew if the soap opera was on the T.V. and she heard the name Erica Kane a lot, then there were two more shows her momma would watch before it was safe to walk through the living room. This is when she and Simon would huddle in Sophie's bedroom where their momma had placed a fan in the window to cool, or at least make bearable, the mugginess from outside. The hum of the fan brought more comfort than the hot air it blew into the room. The two watched Pixie and Dixie, Popeye, and Yogi Bear cartoons on the little black and white television set their momma had carried into Sophie's room one afternoon last summer with the comment, "Don't have it on all day." After their favorite cartoons were over, they played a game of Go Fish or War with an old deck of cards.

When the water pipes popped and water rushed onto a plate or glass, she knew to save her thirst till later. If the front door opened, and the walls purred again of running water, her momma was tending to her mums and roses. Sophie would sneak out of her room, with her shadow Simon shuffling at her heels, to get a cup of apple juice, or some graham crackers before her momma came back in the house. Simon seemed to always be near Sophie, even when she was still, he leaned in close to her side. He listened to Sophie's words and copied those too.

"Boy, you act like I'm your momma sometimes."

"I wish Momma was like you, So."

Sophie couldn't avoid her momma altogether because her voice would find her. Her momma threatened beatings for small sins, like forgetting to sweep the kitchen floor

or for not filling the half-empty salt and pepper shakers. Sometimes, she would be mad because there were only five napkins in the napkin holder and would promise a beating if it didn't get filled "as of yesterday."

Taking care of Grandma Cora in the evenings started for Sophie's momma right after Christmas last year when Grandma Cora had had a stroke. Grandma Cora, who never made Sophie homemade biscuits the way Grandma Ella had, looked over Sophie's shoulder one day while she was coloring and told her to use the brown crayon on the little girl figure's face so she could be beautiful like Sophie. No one had ever told her that before and Sophie hadn't thought of her color as anything, so Grandma Cora's comment made her feel special. But just like Grandma Ella had disappeared once her daddy left, so did Grandma Cora. Her momma hardly ever took her over to her house, and Grandma Cora didn't come to theirs, even before she got sick.

One late summer afternoon, after Sophie and Simon watched their momma's car disappear around the corner, on its way to Grandma Cora's, they gave each other the wild look of freedom gaze and pushed through the front door so they could play outside. They jumped the two porch steps and climbed the maple tree in the front yard.

"Simon, I could see all the way up our street," Sophie said.

"Yeah, me too!" Simon threw himself on the branch above Sophie for an equal vantage point. "I can see the tops of all the trees."

"I know what you mean Simon." Sophie stared through the branches and over rooftops. She tilted her head up and breathed in deep. "Okay, I'm good. I feel like I've got tree power now. Do you, Simon?"

“What’s tree power, So?”

“You know, it’s the power inside the tree bark. The higher you climb, the more power you get. The bark magic goes into your arms and legs like spinach goes into Popeye and you can beat anybody in anything.” She stretched her neck and lifted her head to the sky. “You feel it yet?”

Simon stretched his neck, lifted his head, and took a deep breath.

“Oh, yeah! I feel it now, So. I’m getting down.”

“Wait, Simon.” She pressed on his little hand.

“I see my friend, Rodney, let’s go.” He tried to pull away.

“Simon, you see way out past the last tree, out there where the trees look like they’re cutting through those long yellow streaks the sun makes?” Sophie took her hand off Simon’s and pointed to the horizon.

“If I look too hard, the sun’s in my eyes, but I guess I know where you mean.”

Simon stretched his neck again. “Why, So?”

“Well, I come up here sometimes and look out there. And see where that very last tree is and how the sun hides behind it? That’s where God is. And I talk to him.”

“You come up here by yourself?” Simon said.

“I talk to God, and God talks back.”

Simon was quiet.

“God has daddy’s voice, Simon.”

“Daddy’s God!” Simon sunk down on the tree branch a little. “Wait, what does that mean?”

“His voice is all around me. It’s not loud, but it’s so real.” Sophie started swinging her legs back and forth on the branch. “One time he said to wait for him. Another time he said something about it’s hard, but it has to be. I didn’t get it.” Sophie looked at Simon. “You probably don’t get it, either, do you little brother?”

“That’s freaky,” Simon said. “I want to get down. Do you hear Daddy on the ground?”

“Just up here.”

They climbed down like their hands and feet had the memory of the tree in them.

They hurried up their street, Sophie trying to forget how being up in the tree made her miss her daddy worse than she had in a long time. She wondered if he still remembered her; then she thought, of course he would. She felt a familiar knot in her stomach. She had to force herself to remember his face. What was his mouth like again? His smile? She asked herself these questions and didn’t cry. Because at least she had Simon’s eyes to remind her of her daddy’s.

She and Simon breathed in the sweet orange smells from the magnolia trees. Their leaves bounced shiny and large from their branches. They walked past pretty lawns, and swept porches that led inside homes where Sophie had been promised cold sweet tea on some evenings. The smell of boiled cabbage, cornbread, and greens, maybe mustard, floated in the air. Porch chairs were still empty. The grown-ups wouldn’t be home until the sun was low behind the maple trees, so low that it seemed it would touch the ground. Sophie had told Simon that the sun is what made hell in the nighttime and life on earth during the day. It went down every night, burned a hole through the earth, and rolled its

big ball of fire all through hell, burning all the bad people. Simon had asked her what happened to the bad people during the day. She said they got to eat all the candy, run in all the races they wanted to, and sing their favorite songs until nighttime. “Really, why?” he’d asked.

“Because God thought since the people were going to burn every night, they needed a break from all their pain and hollering.”

Across the street, under a light pole, Sophie’s best friend Linda and other kids had gathered like they did most summer afternoons. It was the gathering place to tell stories, or to enjoy them.

One boy, Wesley, pranced in a circle, with one hand folded across his back, the other held out toward the sky. He was doing the holy dance.

“Look ya’ll, I’m doing Ms. Wilson. *Yessir. Yes, Jesus.*” He chanted to the rhythm of his steps. Others in the group chanted *Hallelujahs and Amens.*

“*Yes sir. Open the door, I’m comin’ home Jesus. Yes, Jesus,*” Wesley pranced to the outer part of the circle. “*God said, I’m going home. I’m going home.*” Wesley pretended to leave the church. “*Usher, open the door for me. Woo, Jesus!*”

Sophie had heard Ms. Wilson did the holy dance at exactly one o’ clock every Sunday at Mt. Zion Baptist Church. Pastor Jones would keep on preaching, as if there had been no interruption.

Linda nudged her friend Danielle.

“Danielle, I know you are a true country girl. Want to know how?”

“How?” Danielle said.

“I know you are because I saw your daddy mow your lawn the other day, and when he was almost done, your momma screamed.”

“How does my momma screaming make me country?” Danielle rolled her eyes and her neck.

“She screamed because she found her car under all that grass.” Linda’s hands were on her hips.

Oooh’s and ah’s sounded from the group.

“Oh yeah, well, that was cold how your mother killed that squirrel from inside the house.” Danielle moved her head in rhythm with her words. “She has a good aim.”

“My momma didn’t kill a squirrel.” Linda pointed at Danielle. “Are you sure that wasn’t your momma Danielle?”

More laughter.

“No, it was your momma.” Danielle’s neck stretched as she talked. “I saw smoke from your momma’s breath break the front window and knock the squirrel to the ground.” She bowed her head and shook it from side to side. “It was still holding onto an acorn.” She clapped her hands together, “Bam! Poor thing. Dead, just like that.”

“Whatever.” Linda fanned the air with a dismissive gesture.

Simon had run to the middle of the street to meet Rodney, his best friend and Linda’s brother, who carried his bat, softball, and two gloves, in both arms.

“Let’s play, ya’ll!” he said to Rodney and two or three other boys.

“Hey, Linda, let’s go over to Tanya’s house,” Danielle said.

Linda shot a glance at Sophie. “What do you think, Sophie?”

“I think I don’t want to walk all the way over to the next block.” Sophie said.

“What’s wrong with the next block?” Danielle said.

“Yeah, Sophie. It might be fun.” Linda said.

“Linda, you know my momma’ll be home in an hour and I’m supposed to make tuna sandwiches for me and Simon tonight before she gets here.” Sophie grabbed the light post, leaned outward, and began to swing, hoping Linda would drop it. “I don’t want to go.”

“Girl, look, Tanya said her cousin just moved here from California and she wants me and my friends to meet her.” Danielle looked at the invisible watch on her wrist. “It won’t take more than twenty minutes.”

Sophie friend’s voices became a warped record. She could just imagine the whipping she would get if her momma caught her off of her street. Sophie’s legs were all of a sudden, sunk-in-quicksand heavy. She tightened her grip on the light pole and forced her knees higher as she swung around. One time, two times, the third swing around the pole she thought of Peter Pan, her favorite fairytale character and remembered when he first realized he could fly.

“Okay, Come on, let’s go.” She swung out and around the pole one last time.

“What? I don’t believe it!” Linda said. “Let’s walk, then.” Linda waited for Sophie at the sidewalk.

Simon had just hit the softball over Rodney’s head and was running with his elbows high to first base. Sophie yelled that she would be right back. The way he leaned and sped around to second base, Sophie knew he was imagining he was some famous

baseball player he'd watched real close on T.V. and then practiced his moves when the commercial came on. She hoped he'd heard what she said.

The wet heat burned Sophie's shoulders. She felt the hairs on her arms tingle, and it made her scrub at her shoulders. She walked on the tips of her toes and stepped extra careful over each crack in the sidewalk. Maybe that tree power she told Simon about was real. She listened to her heart pound in her chest. She squinted up at Linda's booming voice.

"Hey Danielle, how do you know if Tanya's even home?"

"She'll be home all day," said Danielle. Danielle was shorter than Sophie thought she should be for nine, but what she didn't have in height, she made up for with her voice. They called her Lordy on the playground. A combination of loud and shorty. Danielle sped up, turned around and walked backwards to face Linda and Sophie.

Sophie and her friends marched past the neat mix of white clapboard and red brick houses, magnolia trees, lawns where the grass was cut low and the edges straight; Sophie always compared the lawns to the boys on her street who'd just come from the barber shop, their soft fros all straight edged and crisp.

As they all passed Linda's house, Sophie could smell Ms. Sheila's cabbage and cornbread through the screen door. Sophie would make tuna sandwiches for her and Simon as soon as she got home. She and her friends made their way around the corner onto Howard Street.

Her momma had never driven on Howard Street, and Sophie's school bus didn't make any stops here, either. She couldn't help but slow down. She tried to look at what

was around her without turning her head too much. Going from her street to this one was like taking off her Sunday school clothes and putting on dirty hand-me-downs. The raggedy yards, with overgrown grass, and the piled up junk stacked like car wrecks in front of chipped up old houses made her feel strange. Ripped sheets hung with a lazy sag across panes. Sophie's arm pits started to sting and drops of sweat trickled down her side.

Danielle yelled, "I'll be right back. Wait there." She took off running down the street.

"Linda, you been over here before?" Sophie stepped a little faster to catch up with Linda.

"Once, with Danielle. My momma don't want me over here, either."

Sophie couldn't help but watch Linda's nose squinch up as she stretched her neck to try to see through an open window, and then bend forward to get a good look at an overgrown side yard.

"Momma said I don't need to be on no street where the grown folks is home all day, and they having more parties for themselves than they give for they kids."

"You not scared?" Sophie asked. Linda was never scared to Sophie. It showed in the way she walked straight and tall with her shoulders back and her chest slightly out, it showed in the curves of her muscular arms, and in how she would get in old Roy Wilkin's face whenever he tried to pull Sophie's pony tails or when he called her high booty. Sophie needed Linda to say she wasn't scared.

"Naw. We won't be here but for a little bit. I don't get what my momma meant. If the grown folks home all day, why the yards look like everybody moved away from

here?” Linda looked at Sophie. “Sophie, we could go back if you scared you’ll get it from your momma.”

There was a loud whistle and a Hey, come down here coming from about five houses down the street. Danielle stood on an old porch with splintered corners and loose slats, next to a tall, lanky brown-skinned girl with two long ponytails.

“What you want to do?” Linda said.

Sophie looked at Linda, then down the street, and walked toward the old porch where Danielle and the strange girl sat.

“This is Tanya, ya’ll,” Danielle said to Sophie and Linda.

The strange girl, Tanya, didn’t waste time. “My cousin’s gone.”

“She’s gone? We snuck off our street to find out she’s gone? Danielle, I oughta kick your ass.” Linda moved up on one of the steps toward Danielle.

“Danielle didn’t know.” Tanya stood up. “The girl was real nasty, so my momma took her to the bus station.”

“You lying.” Linda said.

“No, I’m not. My momma found her sticking her tongue in this boy’s mouth in an empty Sunday school classroom at Vacation Bible School where she was supposed to be helping my momma teach the kindergarten class.” Tanya had a slow drawl that made the word Sunday seem like two separate words. She said kindergarten so slow, for the first time in her life, Sophie wondered if the word came from something about relatives and a lady in a garden. Tanya sat back down, and told how her momma snatched the girl up by her ear, drug her to their old car, and shoved her inside the backseat. “She didn’t even let

her roll the back window down.” Tanya looked up at Linda and Sophie when she said this. Tanya told how when they got home, her momma told her to pack her bags cause she was nothing but a hussy, and needed to go back to crazy California with all the other hussies who kissed all over everybody, whenever they had a chance, cause there wasn’t any morals out there where all the houses were pink and purple.

By the time Tanya reached her last sentence, Sophie was amused, but disappointed. The last of the tingly feeling in her shoulders was gone, realizing she wasn’t going to meet anyone from California, a place far away from Starks City, where she had just begun to imagine going one day. Ms. Rice, her teacher, talked about California and said it was a good place to go to college. It was always sunny and had beaches. Beaches where the water looked like a million pieces of shiny, glistening glass. Sophie would bring Simon with her so he could see the beach too. They could watch the moon rise from behind the hills that Ms. Rice said seemed so close to you, it seemed you could reach out and touch them. Evening dawn is what Ms. Rice called it. She said those evenings you caught the moon rising made you feel like you got to see something only the lucky got to see. Sophie didn’t feel lucky anymore. She would have to forget about the glass water, the hills, and the evening dawn for now. She wouldn’t hear from the California stranger about Disneyland or movie stars, and she wouldn’t find out if this girl had been in a movie or had visited Michael Jackson, or had been on Soul Train.

“Danielle, you and Tanya a bunch of liars, you make me sick, don’t come on my street no more. Let’s go, Sophie.” Linda said.

Both girls turned to leave.

A broken gate that separated the front and backyard flapped in the breeze.

“Wait, you can come in my backyard. I have something I want to show you. Come on.” Tanya got up surprisingly fast and motioned with her long, skinny arm for the girls to follow her.

They all headed toward the backyard, with Tanya in the lead.

“This mess is wild,” Sophie said.

The overgrown grass that reached up and scratched Sophie’s legs somehow seemed rude.

“Damn, there’s probably snakes back here. Why’s your grass so long?” Linda asked as she made spider-steps through it.

“What’s wrong?” Tanya said.

“What are you trying to show us?” Sophie struggled through the growth. “How long grass can grow in a year?”

“Just follow me to the shed, you big babies,” Tanya said.

Sophie guessed they had been gone only twenty minutes. She thought she could leave in ten. It would take her five minutes to get home; five more minutes to make Simon’s sandwich and her momma would never know she was gone.

Tanya led the girls to a big metal shed that sat along the same side of the yard as a big bed of poison oak. She yanked on the rusty door handle, and motioned for the girls to go in. They stopped two or three steps inside the dark shed to let their eyes adjust. Sophie heard a rustle, then felt something scamper across her right foot. She pursed her lips together to keep from screaming and grabbed Linda’s arm.

“Ouch! Sophie what’s wrong with you?” Linda whispered out loud.

Danielle was next. “Ah, dang! Damn rats!” She shook her right leg the same way Sophie remembered doing when she danced the Hokie Pokie. Her eyes had fully adjusted to the darkness by now. Spider webs made a net around old gardening tools that leaned against one corner of the shed. A long, wooden table stretched across the back wall. Sophie wondered about the man who built it. Did he make stuff on it? Why did he let the shed get so ugly? Was the man Tanya’s daddy? She wondered if Tanya had a daddy.

“Y’all ever smoke before?” Tanya asked.

The girls had formed a circle in the middle of the shed.

“Do you smoke?” Danielle looked down where Tanya’s pockets might be. “You have cigarettes?”

Sophie and Linda stood quiet and attentive. Tanya stepped away from the circle and closed the shed door, leaving a crack. A dusty reddish glow filtered through the crack, and was the only light in the shed now.

Tanya rejoined the circle, and reached down to the waistband of her shorts.

“What’s that?” Sophie asked. She stepped closer to Tanya to see if she really had a cigarette. She did. And it was a whole one, flattened, but whole. Sophie and Simon had picked up butts of cigarettes before, out of her momma’s ashtray in her car. The most they had ever done was smell the butts, pinch at the end to see what was inside and put the butt back exactly as they had found it. They had never been curious enough to actually light one.

Tanya pulled a book of matches from the other side of her waist and picked off a match and lit the cigarette in one motion. Sophie and Linda looked at each other with big baby eyes.

“That’s just how my momma does it,” Sophie said.

“You really going to smoke that?” Linda asked.

Tanya put the cigarette between her two fingers and put it to her lips and took a long drag. The end of it glowed red.

“You try it. It makes you feel kind of dizzy at first. But it feels good after a little while. Try it.” Tanya dragged her words, and handed the cigarette to Sophie.

Danielle snatched it.

“I’ll do it. I’ve done it before. Give it to me.” She took a quick drag and started coughing. “Dog, I haven’t done this in a while.” She coughed again.

Tanya took the cigarette from Danielle and handed it to Sophie.

“Try it,” Tanya said.

Sophie took the cigarette, put it between her fingers, the way she had just seen Danielle and Tanya do, and put it in her mouth.

“Now, suck in,” Tanya said.

Sophie sucked in air and started choking. Linda grabbed it from her and gave it to Tanya.

“Sophie, you okay?” Linda leaned over her and patted her on the back.

“I’m fine,” Sophie said in between coughs.

“Oh, God!” Linda gasped and jumped so badly that Sophie thought the cigarette had done something terrible to her. “We gotta go, Sophie. It’s getting dark!”

The cigarettes meant nothing now. Linda had just reminded Sophie that they had to beat her momma home or she might not live through the night. She held Sophie’s shoulders in her arms and looked at her square. “Go home. Tell your momma you were at my house because Rodney got a bloody nose and I begged you to help me. Okay?”

“Yeah,” Sophie’s tone was flat. “I will.”

“I better go.” Linda let go of Sophie’s shoulders. “We’ll talk tomorrow. She turned to walk toward her house. “Bye girl. It’ll be alright.”

If she could just keep her legs from shaking, Sophie thought the thumping coming from her chest would go back to her normal beat. She needed to feel like things were normal, then maybe they would be. She took deep breaths with each step forward. The closer she got to her house, the more she began to wish. She wished Simon was safe and inside, and by some miracle, she wished her momma was late getting home.

Chapter 4

Rebie

“Mother, those kids are fine. I don’t need to bring Sophie and Simon over here in the evenings.” Rebie finished sweeping her mother Cora’s wood floor and knocked the dustpan hard against the trashcan.

“Rebie,” Cora said with slow deliberate effort, “I haven’t seen Sophie and Simon all summer. Bring them with you next time.” Cora Titus lay propped up on her sofa with two pillows and a blanket. Rebie kept her hair in two cornrows for easy maintenance. Her drugstore glasses sat on the bridge of her nose as she read the newspaper. This picture of her mother made Rebie remember the old Cora, before she’d had her stroke. The Cora Rebie had spent more than half of her life hating. Now, the left side of her mother’s face drooped, she couldn’t hold the paper up more than a few minutes before her head would fall back against the pillow. The paper would slide to the floor, and she would drift into sleep. Before Rebie could feel any lasting pity for her mother, the image of her father’s last day at home would rush front and center in her mind. It was probably better that way. What good would it do to get all sentimental now when it seemed like this stroke was going to take her mother from earth any day?

It was just 4:00 p.m and time for Cora’s dinner. Rebie prepared her smashed carrots and rice, pulled up a kitchen chair next to Cora and woke her up.

“Mother, it’s time for your food.” No neighbors or busy body relatives were going to say Rebie just let her mother die without helping her on her sick bed. Rebie made sure

she ate every day, went her to the bathroom, and had a bath, if the hospital didn't send somebody over.

"Rebie, you treating your kids right?" Cora said, before her eyes fully opened.

"Kids are fine." She spoon fed her mother some carrots. "They get whippings just like anybody else when they bad, but I'm not mistreating them, if that's what you mean."

"Old Mrs. Spencer, live behind you, saying stuff." Cora said, waiting for her second spoonful.

"Mrs. Spencer need to mind her own business."

"Mrs. Spencer, she knows things." Cora said. This time she turned her head like a tortoise and looked Rebie in the eye.

"Bullshit." Rebie pushed the chair back under the table and grabbed her purse.

"Wait, I have to go to the bathroom. Help me."

"I won't help you. The doctor said you have to get stronger and the only way you can get stronger is to try to walk or to exercise." Rebie pulled her mother's blankets back. "Get up, mother, here's your walker." Rebie brought the walker from behind the front door and over to her mother. "Try to get up." Cora brought her legs to the floor and rested.

"It's tough, girl." She was breathing heavy and her face twisted. Rebie hoped she wouldn't start crying like she had been doing a lot lately. Cora put her right hand on the handle of the walker and pulled up part way. Rebie held her under her arm to give her more support. Cora put her other hand on the handle of the walker and stood bracing herself for a moment.

“Okay, now push the walker and move your feet. Push the walker, move your feet. That’s the doctor’s instructions when we bought this thing home.

Cora pushed and shuffled once, then again. The third time, her right arm, her weakest, gave out. She grabbed at the rail. Her nails clipped the metal bar as she fell to the floor.

Chapter 5

Sophie

Her legs barely got her up her porch steps. She opened the screen door and saw Simon sitting on the couch, clutching a pillow. When he saw Sophie, he jumped up.

“So! What happened to you?” I didn’t know where you were. It started getting dark. Rodney didn’t know where you and Linda went. I didn’t even know where momma was. I didn’t want her to come home because you weren’t here, but then I wanted her to come home because I didn’t know where anybody was.” His little voice was shaky and tears made s-shapes down his cheeks.

“Shh, shh, little brother. I’m here now. It’s okay.” Sophie hugged Simon’s head as she spoke.

Simon grabbed Sophie around her waist and held her tight. “Where were you, So?”

“Simon, I yelled at you when you were playing that I was going over to Tanya’s.” She lifted his chin back so she could see his face. “You didn’t hear me?”

“I didn’t hear you, So.” He voice still trembled.

“Don’t cry Simon. I’ll make you your tuna sandwich and watch TV with you. Don’t cry.”

Sophie nudged Simon back toward the couch, and went to turn the television on.

“Simon, you said Momma’s not home?”

“Nope, I don’t know where she is.”

“Thank you Jesus.” Sophie hurried to the kitchen to make Simon’s sandwich.

Sophie sat at the table with Simon but did not eat. As she watched him devour his food, she thought about that street. What a mess. Danielle, Tanya, the no-show California cousin. Cigarettes. And, the strangest thing so far, no momma, for now.

But there was dizziness in her head she couldn't ease. She held her head in her hands to try to stop the feeling. She had disobeyed her mother. She went on an adventure to a dirty street that made her look at her street with new eyes. Before today, her street and her house mostly reminded her that Grandma Ella and her daddy were gone. Sophie hadn't let the magnolia and pine trees be a part of anything special inside of her. But right now, she thought of them, especially the tall pine. It reminded her of how safe she felt in her daddy's lanky arms, how tall he looked to her right before he picked her up. Today, the azalea bush that grew outside the front window, the baby mountain full of pink and white delicate blossoms that bloomed the same every spring made her think of her grandma's voice and her smile. The rocking chair that moved back and forth in the evenings with the slight breeze and the mums on the corners of the steps that her momma watered every morning reminded her of summer evenings at her other house out in the country. Her momma, grandma, and daddy would sit on the porch with citronella candles burning in front of them. Her grandma would move back and forth in her own rocking chair and tell Sophie's daddy not to join that ugly war. Her momma would nod in agreement, and her daddy would say, "I don't plan to do it unless there ain't no more houses to build and the bills can't get paid."

Grandma would say, "Better to be a poor carpenter than a dead one." Sophie would sometimes just sit on the porch and listen to the rhythm of their voices and the

shrill coming from the trees. If she got bored with sitting, she might run around with Simon and try to catch fireflies in a cup and watch them light up.

The streetlights had been on at least half an hour and glowed through the white curtains that hung on the front window.

Sophie switched on the lamp that sat on the end table for Simon even though he was glued to “Good Times” on the television set and didn’t notice. Jay Jay Walker’s, “*Kid dyn-o- mite!*” played in the back of Sophie’s thoughts as she rinsed dishes. She was feeling a little normal again and started wondering about her momma. Was something really wrong? Sophie’s momma was never late for anything. Not from work, not from the store and so far not from Grandma Cora’s house. She wondered if she should call her grandma’s house (she had never done this before) or maybe she should call Linda’s momma.

Sophie dried her hands and went to the phone on the kitchen wall. She had just picked up the receiver when she heard the click, then creak of the front door. She rushed into the living room.

Simon was up on his feet. “Momma what happened to you?” His brow furrowed with worry but he kept his distance. Sophie waited for her momma to speak.

“Your grandma had to be taken to the convalescent hospital. She fell on her hip.” Rebie set her purse down on the sofa and wiped her face.

“Is she going to be okay?” Sophie asked. Rebie moved from the doorway and made her way over toward the kitchen. Sophie and Simon moved to make her path clear.

“Yeah, she’ll be okay. It’ll just be an even longer time before she can take care of herself.”

Rebie’s voice was mean even if she was explaining something sad. Should she ask more or stop now? Sophie wasn’t sure.

“Momma, will she ever be able to take care of herself?”

Rebie didn’t say anything. She opened the refrigerator and pulled out a dish of leftover chicken and rice, put it on the stove and turned on the fire. She got a short glass, clinked two ice cubes in it, and poured brown liquor into it. Sophie thought she’d better join Simon in front of the TV.

“Ain’t we lucky we got em” sang from the television. *Good Times* was over.

At the kitchen table, Rebie ate her dinner and sipped on her liquor. Sophie thought she should run Simon’s bath water before her momma had a chance to ask her to do it. On the way down the hallway, Rebie said, “What did you ask me a while ago, little girl?”

Sophie wished her heart didn’t jump whenever her momma spoke to her.

“I asked if Grandma Cora will ever be able to take care of herself again.”

“Why would you ask some stupid mess like that? I would hope she’d get better. That’s why I keep taking my ass over there every evening, to help her get better.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Sophie stood in the hallway.

“Come take this plate, wash it and put it away.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Rebie sipped on her drink. Sophie came and picked up her plate. She picked it up with wet, shaky hands. It slipped out of her hand and onto Rebie’s lap.

Rebie jumped up and threw the plate against the wall. “You stupid little girl!”

“Sorry momma, sorry!” Sophie stepped back, to avoid what was coming. Rebie swung her arm back and struck Sophie with her open hand, across her face.

Sophie fell on her bottom.

“You’re not sorry, you’re clumsy and stupid.” She struck her again. On the other side of her face this time. Sophie grabbed and pulled on her face. She wished she could pull it off, throw it to the floor, with all the pain, and leave it there. Sophie scooted backwards with her hands and feet away from her mother’s assault. “No momma. No momma.” She managed to stand up. She ran to the corner of the kitchen. She buried her face in her hands, then the corner of the wall. She pressed into it as hard as she could.

I ‘m a wall.
I ‘m a wall.
I can disappear
From it all
From it all.

Rebie moved in closer. She pulled Sophie from the corner of the wall and slung her body across the length of the kitchen. She felt herself floating away. Then she crashed, face-first into the kitchen door. She tried to block her face from the glass. It shattered as her wrist and body weight hit it. She felt her body falling backwards. She wanted to disappear into an old dream of flying angels. Her eyes closed. Had a minute passed or ten? She heard something that made her think of her favorite butterscotch candy.

“Sophie, hey, So?”

“Sophie? Sophie?” The butterscotch candy voice was louder now.

“Sophie, you dead? You dead?”

She felt an aching in her wrist. Simon's voice was in her head now. She was fully awake.

"Simon, where are you?"

"I'm right here, So." Simon was on his knees next to Sophie on the kitchen floor. He held her hand. Your arm is busted and bleeding." His voice shook.

"Momma, Sophie needs to go to the hospital. You tried to kill her." He cried. The tears came slow at first, but then they came like a river. Sophie wanted to comfort him – or would holding him make her feel better? Would it stop her own tears? Would her arms around her brother stop her head from spinning, help her understand what was happening? Would a hug stop the gash on her wrist from dripping like red raindrops onto the kitchen floor?

Simon's voice began to fade into a whisper. The stove and the kitchen window stretched and touched till it seemed to Sophie they were the same thing. The hollow sound of a bat hitting a baseball vibrated in Sophie's ears. The stench of the cigarette smoke from the shed rose up in her nostrils. Words from her earlier song lulled her into a dream, *I'm a wall, and I can disappear, from it all.*

Chapter 6

Rebie

Too many people on that wall, Rebie thought. Dirty chair there. I'll sit on this wall, next to the magazines, away from all these people. Rebie walked over to the chair at the far wall of the hospital waiting room. She scooted her hips up against the curved back of the chair, crossed her legs, and squeezed her purse between her hip and the seat. She picked up a magazine and pretended to read. It was Sophie who had her real attention. She shouldn't have asked so many damn questions when she knew she was upset and tired.

She shifted in her seat. I'm tired. Mother's sick. I just wanted to come home, relax with a little drink and go to bed. The girl's so clumsy. She flipped another page in her book. There was a picture of a baby's face, a Gerber baby face-big brown eyes, dimpled, toothless smile. She thought if there was an article that went with that baby picture, it ought to be how having a cute baby don't make a cute life for the momma. It's not the diapers, and the feeding and the cleaning, it's the man-the daddy who puts the baby in you, lies and says both of you are his little darlings for a few years, and then he vanishes, leaving you to explain to the big brown eyes that daddy is gone and ain't coming back. Those big brown eyes are staring at you, now, trying to figure out where the hell daddy is, and you sick your own self trying to sort out what happened. Rebie threw the magazine on the table. The book stayed open. The article should be about how paying for a child to go to the hospital on a beautician's salary could make a woman go bankrupt. Rebie dug in her purse. He was still her husband. His absence didn't change law. What

was it that made a man just leave his wife, and her...*his* two small children? Just that one phone call is all she got, and he didn't even have the decency to tell her why, just that he had to go. The bastard. She thought his momma knew more than what she let on. Those two were so close. Rebie used to think Ella would fall over and die without him. Rebie smiled thinking about how Ella must be getting along without her perfect son to gloat over. She bent over and closed the magazine.

A loud speaker called for a Nurse Stanley to report to ICU. Rebie was thankful for the interruption. She would just get through this mess with Sophie and push the whole incident out of her mind. Just like she pushed Henry out of her mind when he invaded it, uninvited.

A male nurse, in a white smock, swaggered by Rebie. She adjusted her hips in her seat, crossed her left leg over her right. Her dress inched up and exposed her thigh. She smiled as he passed. He smiled at Rebie and said hello.

“Hello,” she said. “You working hard I see.”

He stood a few feet away but stepped closer now.

“Oh, I'm getting ready to clock out now, lady. What are you doing in here? You look healthy to me.” His eyes talked to her thigh.

“Oh I'm here with my little girl. She cut her arm on some glass.” Rebie rubbed her exposed thigh.

“I'm sorry to hear about that lady. Last little girl who was in here getting worked on ended up not going home,” he said.

“That so.” Rebie didn't want to ask too many questions.

“Word got out that the momma got mad at the little girl, threw a broken glass at her face.” The nurse pulled his arm back to demonstrate. “The little girl blocked her face, thank God, but the glass ripped a six-inch gash in her wrist. Damn shame what some people will do to they own flesh and blood.”

“Damn shame.” Rebie’s thighs started to sweat. She crossed her other thigh over her leg. “It is a damn shame, isn’t it?” The nurse raised an eyebrow.

Rebie felt her stomach ball up. She had to maintain her cool, anyway.

“What happened to the little girl?” Rebie said this in her sweetest, most concerned voice.

“DPSS came and got her. She’s in foster care now. We all know that’s not always better for these kids.” Nurse Stanley shook his head and said *uh uh uh*.

Rebie had more questions that she choked up inside her, afraid all of a sudden. She never was afraid of what she did to her own kids. They belonged to her. Nobody ever asked her questions about what belonged to her. But, then again, there was never a need to take her kids to the hospital. Usually those little bruises that showed up on their skin right after she tore their tails up went away after a few days, and Sophie always covered up if she had to go to school. Rebie never even worried about it. DPSS? She always thought it was other people who had DPSS in their life. What if they took Simon and Sophie? She dismissed the thought just when it started to make her feel anxious.

“Well, I’m just waiting for the doctors to finish so I can go check on my baby.” Rebie uncrossed her legs and pretended to read her magazine again.

“Alright then lady, you take it easy. And take care of your little girl. You know kids can get into some crazy situations and end up hurting themselves. Always got to keep an eye on them.” He strolled forward a few steps, turned to look at Rebie one last time before he walked down the hall.

“And you take care.” She whispered more to herself. Her shoulders relaxed. If she could have met him at church or the club, she was sure she would have invited him over for dinner, but here, under these circumstances, it was wrong. Maybe she would see him around town.

She picked up her magazine again and wondered what Sophie might say to the doctors about her injuries. Rebie had told the triage nurse, who wrote it down as fact, that Sophie and her little brother were running through the house. Sophie slipped on water on the kitchen floor, and fell into the back door. Well, the back door was open a little, and Sophie fell through it. She fell down the stairs and hit her head, but before she fell down the stairs, she tried to break her fall. She stuck her hand through the backdoor window, and that’s how she cut her wrist open.

The triage nurse’s brow had tightened. Rebie crossed and uncrossed her ankles.

“Your back door opens out?”

Oh shit. “Yes, Girl. My husband replaced that door a few years ago, and put it on backwards. Can you believe that?”

The triage nurse smiled.

Back in the same chair, she waited for news about Sophie. At least Simon was at Sheila’s for the night. One less thing for her to worry about.

Now she faced one of those empty moments when her mind wandered. She shook her head now to try to shake off the recurring dream that had haunted her for so long: She was a passenger inside a moving train car and heard children playing just outside the car. The noise lured her to open the box car door. Every time she reached for the handle, the door would disappear. The walls would turn smooth and there she would be, unable to get out. The children's voices faded until she only heard the rhythm of the train wheels moving on the tracks.

Rebie didn't know what the dream meant but she knew it made her feel trapped and naked at once. She tossed the magazine back on the table.

She couldn't be worried. She'd just take care of her day to day stuff and keep on moving.

She picked another magazine from the table; it had the latest model Ford on the cover. She was once a little girl putting magazines like this one, in a cardboard box.

"Just put it all in that box, her mother Cora had said. "He ain't coming back so I'm getting rid of all of his stuff."

She was fourteen and the memory was unclear, but Rebie made sure to revisit it every so often to keep alive the resentment she had for her mother. The smell of Old Spice cologne and paper vaporized when the triage nurse tapped her on her shoulder, bringing the smell of bleach, the stale smell of coffee and magazine paper to her senses.

"Rebie, darlin', could you come back here with me? There's a couple more questions to fill out before you can go see Sophie?"

"Yes, ma'am." Rebie followed the triage nurse.

“My name is Hazel.” Without looking at Rebie, she led her into the triage booth just past the hospital information desk.

“Have a seat,” said Nurse Hazel.

Rebie sat in a chair on the other side of the nurse’s station. She placed her purse on her lap and patted and smoothed her hand over the top of it. Nurse Hazel sat in her seat and pulled up to her desk where she picked up a pad of paper and a pen. Rebie had expected hospital forms. She looked at this woman closer than she had earlier. Hair pulled back into a bun. Skin, smooth, light brown. She could be forty or fifty. It was difficult to tell. *She probably thinks she’s better than most of us.* Uniform a crisp white button down dress, her eyes, dark and still. Rebie had other feelings about her, she just couldn’t identify them. She waited for the nurse to speak.

“First off, honey, I want you to know your baby is going to be alright.” Nurse Hazel looked up now into Rebie’s face. “She has a concussion but with the proper amount of rest and a little aspirin, she’ll be fine.” She paused, leaned in just a little, looked at Rebie’s hands that were tapping her purse. Rebie stopped tapping and found words.

“Oh that’s such good news. I told those kids not to play in the kitchen. I hope she learned her lesson.” She replayed what she just said in her mind. Nurse Hazel said nothing. Rebie continued. “Oh, when will I be able to see my baby?” This was a good, caring question. “Is she awake?”

“Yes, sugar, you’ll be able to see her after you answer a few questions for me. Nurse Hazel pulled the pad into her lap. “See, the problem is, honey, when a little girl

comes into the Jefferson County Hospital with a concussion and a gash on her wrist as wide as the Mississippi River-eyebrows go up.” She raised the pencil from the paper. “Now I’m not saying you did anything wrong, baby, but I have to ask these questions and give your answers to the social worker. You understand.” She looked at Rebie.

“Yes, I’m fine with questions.” She tried to make her voice smooth. She hadn’t met to talk so soft.

“What was that, sugar?” said Nurse Hazel.

“I said I’m fine with questions because I haven’t done anything.” Damn, too loud.

“Alright, then. Tell me again how Sophie got the gash on her wrist and how she became unconscious,” said Nurse Hazel.

Rebie told the same story she had told the nurse when she first questioned her. She talked slow and deliberate, in her most proper tone. At times, Nurse Hazel would look up and say, “Say that again, sugar,” or she might replace the word honey for sugar. To which Rebie would repeat details of what she had just said. The nurse continued with several more questions. Rebie couldn’t read Nurse Hazel’s face as hard as she tried. By the end of their session, Rebie’s brow was sweaty; she had stopped patting her purse and her hands were clasped together with sweat. At the end of the questioning, Rebie felt like she had been in a fist fight and lost. She had a headache and thought a nice glass of rum on the rocks would do well to dull her growing headache and to erase the whole evening. She sat up in her seat and had a sudden feel of freshness. More and more, rum was a companion she counted on to calm and comfort her. She couldn’t wait to get home.

“Honey, can you hear me? Nurse Hazel said.

“Yes. What was that?” Rebie said.

“I said did you hear me say you can go see Sophie in her room now?” She tucked the notepad from her interrogation into her desk drawer. She pulled out a ring of keys and used the smallest one to lock the desk drawer.

“Oh, that would be wonderful. I just want to take my child home so we can both get some real good rest.” Rebie thought she saw Nurse Hazel roll her eyes a little. *No, she wouldn't do that right in front of her.*

The nurse had an aide take Rebie to the fourth floor of the hospital – the pediatric floor.

Sophie was in room 423. The aide got Sophie's clothes from the cabinet in the room while Rebie walked over to Sophie's bedside. Sophie was sitting up.

“Sophie, get your clothes on so we can go home.”

Rebie looked at her daughter's arm, at the fresh black thread from the stitches that kept her skin held together, at the puffy, bruised flesh around it. Rebie recalled how one day in grade school, she fell from the swings and cut her arm open on a piece of glass that was just under the sand's surface. The stinging, the blood, her screams were all so pushed back in the past, she hadn't even remembered the whole thing until she saw Sophie's arm. She felt a twinge deep within her that slowly built up to full sorrow. Cora had rushed over to the school that day and refused the principal's offer to call the ambulance. Instead, Cora held Rebie's arm out in front of her, making sure the white bandage that quickly stained with red stayed in place. They rushed over to Jefferson hospital, the same hospital she was leaving from right now with Sophie. Cora, her momma, saw to it that the

nurses and the doctor took care of her arm. Rebie remembered how she held back tears when the doctor starting stitching her wound because Cora's face was already smeared with them, and Rebie was tougher than Cora. The tears she rejected that day stung for release now.

“You not moving fast enough, little girl.” What she said to her daughter calmed her. Her tears were stifled once again, and she felt in control once again. The sorrow she'd felt seconds before was gone. Gone the way the sudden down pouring of rain pounds on rooftops and floods the street and then, in an instant, stops. Rebie watched Sophie struggle to get her things and wondered who had she had felt that deep pain for. Was it for herself, Sophie, her own momma? She watched Sophie struggle to pick up her bag she had just zipped.

“I'll get it. Open the door.” She knew she couldn't let her carry her own bag out the hospital room. It would look heartless.

Chapter 7

Sophie

A board covered the backdoor window, shutting out the August sun. A diagonal scar started at the nape of Sophie's left wrist and ended just before the bend in her arm. A new quietness lived in her house and she accepted it. A new school year would start in a week and she accepted that too. Sophie would just accept everything. This last week before school started, she got up in the mornings, made her bed, ate her cereal and went back to her room until it was time to fix herself and Simon's lunch. She fixed their peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and ate her lunch in silence. She would go back to her room until her mother drove away to take care of grandma Cora. She didn't go outside this last week. She went back to her room and sat on her bed. Sometimes she would watch TV, sometimes she would leave it off. Simon was there. He carried his GI Joes and matchbox cars with him as he followed his sister to her room. He would crash the cars and make the soldier dolls talk to each other. On Thursday evening, Simon spoke.

"So, what's wrong? You don't even talk anymore. Your wrist hurt?"

"No."

"Oh, well, why won't you talk?"

"I don't have a reason to talk."

"Don't you want to talk to me?" Simon crawled on Sophie's bed where she sat.

"I'm tired of talking to my GI Joes."

"I feel bad, I guess." Sophie turned onto her stomach and put her chin in her hands. "I wish we could leave here."

“We can’t leave until we are grown, So.”

“Yeah, that’s the problem Simon. That’s why I don’t feel like talking. It makes me sad to think about living here till then.” She sat up on her bed. “I’ve been dreaming about daddy coming home, but it seems like it’s just a dream. Nothing so far comes true. I like Ms. Shelia. She’s a good momma.”

“I don’t know, I guess. I don’t think daddy’s comin’ back. I prayed about it too, and you don’t know it, but I cried.”

“You prayed; that’s good. I thought I was the only one praying. Maybe God will listen to us, then.”

“So, we should ask Miss Sheila to take us to church again. I think if you pray in church, God hears you better.” Simon looked at Sophie’s scar.

“ I don’t know about that, baby brother, but maybe we can ask Linda to ask her momma to take us Sunday.” She sat up. “Yeah, that would be good to go the day before school starts. Maybe God can help us get good teachers too.”

“Hey, Simon. Sophie reached under her bed and pulled out a book by Mercer Mayer. Have you read this book?”

“I don’t like to read. What’s that funny thing on the cover?”

“His name is Little Critter. I really don’t know what he is.” Sophie looked at the cover. “I think it’s a porcupine.”

“What’s the name of the book?” Simon said.

“*It’s called I Was So Mad.* She turned to the middle of the book. “Simon, I like to read this page over and over. It makes me laugh. Read it with me Simon.”

“What’s the book about?”

“Little critter is mad ‘cause his parents won’t let him do anything he wants. He wants to do crazy stuff, too. So after he keeps getting into trouble and he gets madder and madder, he says this. Read it with me.”

“Okay, So’, but read it slow.”

Sophie held the book in front of her so both she and Simon could see it. They both read the page Sophie held open.

“You won’t let me do anything I wanna do, I said. I guess I’ll run away, that’s how mad I was.”

They both laughed. Simon laughed so hard, he fell off the bed. Sophie laughed so hard, her eyes teared, and her stomach hurt. After a few minutes, they both calmed down.

“Simon, isn’t that the funniest thing you ever heard of? He said he’s going to run away cause he’s mad.”

“That critter is crazy, So. Yeah, that was funny. Simon went to Sophie’s door. So, I have to go pee. Does your scar hurt you, So?”

“I feel it, Simon, but it doesn’t hurt as much as it did a few days ago.”

“Is it going to stay there forever?”

“I don’t know. Sophie lifted and turned her wrist up. “First it has to heal, then I have to get the stitches out, then I have to take care of it and make sure I don’t hurt it again. I hear some scars never go away. We’ll see.”

Friday morning, Sophie awoke to a nagging throb from her wrist. She must have lain on it during the night because it seemed to throb in time to the tapping of raindrops

on her window. Sophie wondered why it had to rain in Arkansas in the summer, and especially why did it have to rain three days before school started. The night before, she had decided she would go play outside since she hadn't done it all week, and she wanted to make Simon feel better. She had decided she would go see Linda during the day and catch up with all that had happened in the past couple of weeks. Linda would know more about what was going on outside Sophie's house and she could tell Sophie what Sheila, Linda's momma, might know about the whole hospital visit. Sophie lay in her bed with her wrist up, hoping it would stop hurting. She stared at the white ceiling and began to pretend Ms Sheila was her momma and Linda was her older sister. She saw she and Linda getting up in the morning and making Rodney and Simon's breakfast. They would all would go outside to play. They'd come back inside where Ms. Sheila would greet them with a smile and tell them about how she and Linda were her little girls and they were good, too, and they would grow up to be anything they wanted to be because they were so smart. Then Sophie pictured herself all grown up with her hair pressed and curled, with a red flower hair pin clipped to one side of her head. She carried a purse to match the dress, and wore soft red pumps to complete the outfit. She floated down her sidewalk to a bus stop. Neighbors and strangers greeted her with a nod and a smile. She smiled back. She lay in bed smiling up at the white ceiling wishing it would open up and take her to her grown-up world where she and Simon could live together, free and painless. She didn't want to be too far away from Simon. She counted eighteen from ten. Eight more years before she would be free, unless her daddy came or someone else came and paid enough attention to save her.

The doorbell rang and Sophie jumped out of bed, forgetting about her throbbing wrist. She held it up, hoping that would lessen the aching. Her mother was up earlier than her usual 9:30 a.m. because Sophie heard her say hello to the visitor.

“Yes, my name is Rebecca Brown. Why, who are you? Sophie leaned into her closed door to hear.

“My name is Walter Spencer from the Department of Social Services, and I need to talk to you, ma’am.” His voice was deep and far away like he was yelling into a jar.

“Oh, well, okay, Mr. Spencer, come in,” Rebie said.

Sophie tip-toed into Simon’s room where he was just getting out of bed.

Sophie put her finger to her mouth. “Shh.”

“Why?” Simon rubbed his eyes and the frown on his brow.

“Listen,” Sophie whispered. She tiptoed to Simon’s door, which she had partially closed. Simon followed.

“Have a seat. I was just watching the morning news. I guess that crazy war is getting worse and worse, huh?” Rebie said.

“Yes, Ma’am. It’s a shame young men are fighting in that nonsense. If they do make it out alive, who knows what kind of affect such terrible nonsense will have on them.”

Simon whispered to Sophie. “What does he want, So?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, Mr. Spencer, what brings you here this morning?”

“I was sent here by Jefferson Hospital, Ma’am, to check on you and your daughter... Sophie, yes that’s what I read right here. How is Sophie, Ms. Brown?” Rebie didn’t speak right away. “Ma’am, the hospital sent me here because there are some questions about the cause of the injuries she was treated for at the hospital. It says here in my notes that you are aware that the hospital personnel suspected your daughter’s injuries may have come from a person, not from a falling accident.”

“Spencer? The lady that lives on the street behind me, Iowa street, her name is Spencer. You any relation to her?” Rebie’s voice was higher than normal, like she was pretending to be someone younger.

“Ms. Spencer is my father’s sister, my aunt,” said Mr. Spencer. “Now, I answered your question, please answer mine. How is Sophie, and did you have anything to do with her injuries?”

Simon pulled on Sophie’s nightgown, and Sophie grabbed Simon’s shoulder. Their eyes locked—Sophie thought she saw the reflection of her eyes in Simon’s.

“Sophie is getting along fine. Her arm is healing just like it’s supposed to, and hell no, I didn’t have anything to do with her injuries. Who in the hell you think I am? I wouldn’t hurt that girl, or her brother, and I love my kids, even if they get on my nerves sometimes, and even though I am raising them by myself, and even though I see how badly behaved other folks’ bad-ass kids is when I drop them off at the school house. And even though their father is a no-good, disappearing, no caring, son-of-a-bitch, No, I didn’t hurt that girl, It’s just like I said at the hospital. She slipped on some water and fell.” By now Rebie’s voice was almost shrill, and Sophie thought she would hear something hit

the wall any minute. She and Simon could have been mistaken for store mannequins, they were so still.

“Whoa, ma’am. No need to get so upset. Tell you what. Let me talk to Sophie, then I want to talk to your son. What’s his name? Simon, yes, it says right here. Simon.”

“I don’t have to let you talk to my kids. Hell, you might be a molester or something. Maybe you need an investigation.”

“Ma’am, you are mistaken. You *do* have to let me talk to your kids, or I can call the police and have you arrested for non-cooperation with our agency. I’m losing patience, ma’am.” Now the man’s voice was changing. Sophie thought she heard a tremble in it.

“Sophie! Get out here. This man wants to talk to you. Sophie!”

Sophie rushed into the living room, leaving Simon at his bedroom door.

Rebie stood on guard in the kitchen doorway. “Yes, Ma’am?”

“Sophie, this is Mr. Spencer, and he wants to talk to you. Go ahead Mr. Spencer, talk.” Mr. Spencer was a tall brown man with a crisp ironed white shirt and pressed black pants. His smile was friendly, and his eyes were a deep, dark brown. His eyes were much easier to look into than her momma’s fiery brown ones that Sophie did her best to avoid. She thought he had Ms. Spencer’s nose.

Mr. Spencer nodded at Sophie and she tried to grin back, managing a smirk.

“Ma’am, I am required to talk to Sophie alone. It’s up to you where you would like for me to interview her. Would you like for us to stay here in the living room, go outside, or maybe sit on the back porch?”

“There’s no place I’d like for you to be alone with my daughter, Mr. Spencer.”

Rebie reached over to the end table, opened it, and grabbed a pack of Marlboro Lights and matches from the drawer. She lit the cigarette, shook the match out, and took a long drag.

“Ma’am, I am licensed by the State of Arkansas to carry on investigations such as this. If you want to call my boss before we carry on the interview, I can give you the number. But I will interview your daughter, today, here, and alone.”

“Go to the back porch, then.” She took a long drag on her cigarette and showed him the way. Mr. Spencer followed her and Sophie followed him. Rebbe slammed the door behind Sophie and Sophie’s shoulders jerked from the sound.

The back steps were damp from the morning rain, but Sophie sat anyway. The citrus of the sassafras mixed with the stink of the paper mill miles away. The smell was thicker after a rain. In the corner of her eye, the white, wild rose petals along the fence sprung gently up and down. All these, and even the concrete steps, made Sophie feel at ease. She tucked her hands under her bottom and waited for the questions to start.

“Sophie, you have a nice backyard.”

“Thank you.”

“I used to play in my backyard when I was a boy. Me and my little brother use to race each other and run after our dog, and all kinds of things. But guess what?”

“Yessir?”

“Our house backed up against the woods so it was like our yard never ended. We would play amongst the big tall maples and dogwoods. Then we’d swim in the creek that

ran along the perimeter of the woods. We pretended to be hunters, cowboys and Indians, Robin Hood—you know steal from the rich, give to the poor. Those were fun times, indeed.” Sophie wondered if Mr. Spencer got his deep voice from yelling deep into the woods for his little brother when he was a boy. His voice echoed like it could be heard through all the trees and brambles, clear to the other side of a wood. His voice made her think of a far off place, some place she couldn’t see, just felt. She looked up at Mr. Spencer’s mouth to see where that sound came from. He looked down at her, she looked away, embarrassed. He had stopped talking, Sophie was quiet.

“Sophie, is your backyard a fun place for you and your brother to play?”

“Yessir.” In her mind, there was, all of a sudden, a picture of her mother, looking down at her, with her eyes that should have been a pretty brown, but instead danced an evil fire.

“Sophie, I know you don’t know me, and I bet you don’t have a lot of adults to talk to.” He put his yellow pad of paper on the bottom step and looked at her. “But I want to tell you that anything I ask you, I’m asking it to make sure you are getting treated the way you deserve, which is with love. Do you understand me?”

“Yessir.” Sophie looked at the concrete step in front of her.

Mr. Spencer asked several more questions about how she and Simon got along, and how many friends she had in school. He asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up. He asked her other boring questions that she thought a teacher might have asked her before. She continued to answer with single words like yessir and no sir or math and Peter Pan. After a time, when her bottom started getting sore, and after she had forgotten

about the wild rose petals, the smell of citrus, and the stink of the mill, Mr. Spencer picked up his notepad, and got up to leave.

“Sophie, before I go, I have one more question.”

“Yessir?”

“How did you get that big gash on your arm?”

“I cut it on the kitchen window.” There, she hadn’t lied.

“Oh, I see. Well, how did you cut it on the kitchen window?”

Her stomach started getting hot, her eyes watered.

“Me and Simon was running in the kitchen, and there was some water on the floor, I slipped and fell against the window. That’s how I did it.” Damn. She just wanted him to leave now.

“Okay, Ms. Sophie. You take it easy, and we’ll talk again, soon.” He opened the back door and gestured for Sophie to go in before him. Sophie stepped in front of Mr. Spencer; she heard a clank from behind her. Ms. Spencer, her neighbor, had dropped her pot again.

“Walter! Do your job like you supposed to, now. Kids supposed to act like kids, and grown folks supposed to act like grown folks!” Sophie thought Ms. Spencer’s voice sounded too much like Mr. Spencer’s for her to be a lady.

“Yeah, Auntie, I’ll talk to you later!” Sophie looked back just then and saw Mr. Spencer wave at his aunt.

Inside, the smoke of Rebie’s cigarette crept in front of Sophie’s nose. She hated how cigarette smoke made her feel like she was choking. And now it reminded her of the

shed and the day she snuck off her street. She couldn't share that with her mother, and hadn't even told Simon. She guessed she would have to keep it a secret, like she had to keep what happened to her wrist a secret from Mr. Spencer. Sophie didn't say goodbye to him when he waved and smiled the friendliest smile she had seen on a man before. She rushed to her room, shut the door, and lay down on her pillow waiting for her mother to shoo the man away and to hear the slam of the front door. She lay there on her stomach, rubbing on the nickel she kept under her pillow.

Maybe she had fallen asleep, because when Rebie opened her bedroom door, Sophie jumped up and coughed at the sudden sting in her nostrils from the paper mill. Rebie asked Sophie what the man had talked about. Sophie retold the conversation as best as she could. Strange, but she felt good re-telling the story. It was like getting an A on a quiz in school. When she was done, Sophie started swinging her feet back and forth

“Okay then. Just you make sure you remember that you and Simon were playing and that's how you got hurt.” Rebie had a fresh cigarette and took a long drag. “That's the truth, and I better not find out you've said anything different or I'll beat your ass, you hear me?”

“Yes, ma'am.” Sophie stared at the wall until the door clicked shut.

After a few minutes, Sophie got up to turn on her television and she heard Simon's little feet shuffle on the wood floor outside her room.

“Sophie?”

“Simon, why you still whispering? Come in.”

“Did you tell? Did you tell what really happened to your arm?”

“Yep, I said me and you was playing in the kitchen, I fell against the door, broke the glass, and cut my wrist.”

“Oh...that’s not what happened.” Simon’s mocha eyes looked like dried clay. The rich, silky clay after-a-rain look that Sophie was used to seeing was gone in an instant.

“It is if I want to stay out of the hospital, so that’s what happened, and when and if somebody talks to you, that’s what you tell them, hear me little brother?”

Sophie couldn’t worry about Simon’s feelings. Since she came home from the hospital, she was different. Maybe it had to do with going off the street, too. She really didn’t know. She did know her wrist hurt, she knew there was something different about Simon and her momma and her and her momma. It was a feeling that made her feel alone, even though Simon was right there. Yogi Bear played on the television, and Simon watched while he rolled a Hot Wheels car back-and-forth on the floor. Sophie watched the screen but pictured the time when one afternoon last summer, in her bedroom with the television playing like it was now, her momma spoke to her.

“Sophie, if you ever tell about getting whipped or about getting blisters or welts, I’ll go to jail.” Those words came down on Sophie like the house came down on the wicked witch of the East. She felt trapped. Jail was a place Sophie put in the same category as hell, and she wouldn’t be responsible for sending her mother to hell. Her daddy was already gone.

“Simon, the next time we play make believe we’re going to call the name of the game house secrets, okay?”

“If it doesn’t rain, I don’t care.” He revved his car on the floor. “So’, what are stitches made of?”

“I guess some thick thread, like what you sew clothes with.”

“When they take them out, what’ll they do with the thread?”

“Throw it away, I guess. Boy, why you asking me that?”

“I was just wondering what fixes your arm and what happens to it when it’s done fixin’ your arm. When we play outside, maybe we can pretend I’m a doctor.” Simon stopped revving and looked at his sister. “So’, can you tell the doctor to save the thread and can I have it?”

“Sure, Simon. I’ll try. Now watch cartoons.”

Chapter 8

August 1968

Linda must have heard the screened-in porch door slam shut because she opened the front door before Sophie could knock her usual three times.

“Hey, Sophie. Hey Simon.” Linda stepped onto the porch. “Where you been? Let me see your arm. Momma told me you got stitches. Let me see.”

“Linda, where’s Rodney? He inside?” Simon peered around Linda’s side.

“He’s in there. Go ahead, Simon. I think he’s watching TV.”

Simon slipped past Linda and inside the house.

“Let me see, Sophie.”

“Okay, wait.” Sophie turned her wrist up so Linda could see where her stitches still kept her skin together. Her skin had begun to raise a little around the stitching. Black pieces of the thread stuck out on the end of the scar.

“Oh, damn, does that hurt?” Linda shook her hands like she was shaking water off of them. “Looking at it makes me feel queasy.”

“No, it doesn’t hurt the way it did at first. But, I can’t wait to get these stitches out. They itch. And of course I can’t scratch it.” Sophie put her wrist down. “We have a lot to talk about, Linda. Let’s go in your backyard so nobody can hear us. Where’s your momma?”

Linda had stopped shaking her hands, and it seemed to help her remember she and Sophie had so much to catch up on.

“Momma’s at work till tonight. Come on.”

The two girls walked through Linda's house to the backyard. The two milk crates were still in that private place between the back of Linda's shed and the fence separating her yard and the neighbor's. Sophie and Linda sat on the crates, faced each other with their arms on their knees—their girl-talk pose.

Linda was in the same grade as Sophie, but was nine months older and at least an inch taller. Even though they had been going to the same school since kindergarten, they weren't friends until that day back in third grade, the Friday before Mother's Day, when their teacher, Ms. Johnson, paddled Linda for telling her to stop asking Sophie questions that were none of her business. It wasn't that Sophie was being bad when Ms. Johnson said to name a favorite time she'd had with her momma, she just couldn't think of an answer. She just stood there in the middle of the circle the class had formed and waited for something to happen. Ms. Johnson, from her teacher chair at the head of the circle, went from a polite "Tell us, honey, it's alright, tell us a special time with you and your momma" to "What's wrong with you, little girl? You need to speak up." That's when Linda stood up and told Ms. Johnson off. Ms. Johnson responded with three swats with the paddle on Linda's behind, in front of everyone. Linda didn't cry. To Sophie, it looked like she stared at the classroom door keyhole, instead. The two hadn't mentioned that paddling since, but they were best friends from that day on.

Linda leaned in a little closer to Sophie. "Okay, girl, what in the hell happened? Your momma lost her mind or what? Did she find out you left off your street?"

“Uh uh. She still doesn’t know about that. She got mad I spilled food on her lap and went crazy, tried to throw me through the door, it seemed like. Next thing I know I’m laying in the hospital bed with a terrible headache and a big old gash on my wrist.”

“I’m so sorry, Sophie. Sometimes, I hate your momma. I can’t believe some of the things you tell me. One day, you won’t have to put up with that shit, I know it.”

Sophie began to rub her hand along the chain-link fence next to her, like she was playing a harp. “You think so? Linda, I bet your momma don’t beat you, like mine beat me, huh?”

“My momma yells at me sometimes for not doing my chores, or for messing with Rodney, but she don’t just beat on me just because, and my momma counts.”

“What you mean, she counts?”

“I mean, if she does decide to give me a whipping, she tells me how many swats I’m going to get. It’s usually five, unless I really did something wrong, then it’s eight swats.” Linda held up eight fingers, and started laughing. “That’s crazy, huh, but I at least know when the shit’s going to be over.”

Linda liked to say shit. But then, so did Ms. Sheila. Linda also loved telling stories. Sophie watched her tell lots of stories about her family to their friends at school and on their street. There was the time her uncle took her and Rodney to the Jug and Jigger liquor store a few blocks from their house on Michigan. He bought them all the Now ‘n’ Later’s they wanted, a bunch of chewing gum, Jolly Ranchers sticks, and a box of Milk Duds, each. He set the candy and two cold beers on the counter. When Mr. Willie, the store owner, told her uncle how much everything cost, her uncle signed a

piece of paper, and they all left. The next week, when all the candy was gone, Linda went back to the liquor store, put some more candy on the counter, and the man told her how much the candy was. She asked him, "Can I sign the paper like my uncle did." Mr. Willie thought her uncle had sent her to the store, so he had her sign her name to her uncle's paper. Linda said she didn't know why she could sign a paper instead of pay money for candy, but since her uncle had done it, she just thought it was something special he had going with Mr. Willie. She had been so happy to walk out of that store with all that candy free candy, and she thought what a nice man Mr. Willie was. The next day when her uncle visited, Linda overheard him tell her mom that he must have been drunk when he bought them all that candy, because when he went to pay his bill, he owed as much for the candy as he did for the liquor.

If someone else had told the story, it might have been boring, but Linda knew how to move her hands, point her finger, put a hand on a hip, and even rotate her neck at just the right time to keep everybody's eyes on her.

What she just told Sophie about her mom counting wasn't a funny story, it was sad, at least to Sophie. She felt sorry for herself, right then.

"Look at all those black birds, Sophie. Linda pointed at a flock of black birds that were swarming near the next door neighbor's persimmon tree. "They get on my nerves. They just like to shit all over the place, and it stinks."

"Why do they come around here anyway? I thought they like corn and rice." Sophie shaded the glare of the sun in her eyes with the inside of her hand and looked at the birds landing and flying, flapping and pecking at whatever they landed on.

“I don’t know, just looking for a place to shit, I guess. Then they go off to the next place, shit that all up, and take off again. Fly, land and shit. Shit, fly, land. That’s their job in life. Nasty ass birds.”

Sophie fell against the fence laughing. Linda laughed, too.

“Girl, I should have come down here last week if I’d known you were going to be cracking jokes.”

Chapter 9

September 1968

The second week of school, a student came into Ms. Rice's room and handed her a little square note that Sophie recognized as a pass to Principal Davis' office. She assumed the note was for Mean Willie, like usual, and looked back down at her social studies book. But Ms. Rice swisha swisha'd over to Sophie's desk and put it down there, instead. Sophie slid the note under her palm and grabbed her books. She ran over in her mind what she could have done to go to the principal's office. She had cheated on one math problem for the first time in her life the week before. Had somebody told? The questions were from work they'd learn at the end of 5th grade, and she'd forgotten it over the summer. Li'l Bit Johnson was a math wiz and had left his math answers completely visible. She thought about the punishment for cheating as she grabbed her book bag and made her way down the shiny hall to the principal's office. She counted ten clear doorknobs attached to wood doors. She looked up at eleventh doorknob to the door's window that had little black lines going crossways through it and read the title "Office" on the glass. She opened the door and saw Simon sitting on one of the four wood seats propped against the wall.

"Hey?" Sophie said as she glanced at Simon and handed her note to the secretary who stood behind the long, tall desk in front of her.

"Sit down, Sophie. Principal Davis will be out in a second, the secretary said.

Just as she turned to sit next to Simon, Principal Davis stepped out of his office in his pressed slacks and suspenders that looked like a little road over his big belly. Sophie pictured driving one of Simon's Hotwheels over one.

“So! Momma's going to get us if we get in trouble.” Simon swung his legs back and forth under his chair like he was nervous. “What are we in here for?” he said.

“Hey Mr. and Ms. Brown. Come on into my office.” Principal Davis sounded so friendly, Sophie felt a little less uneasy. The last time Sophie had been in the principal's office was when she had moved from Grandma Ella's to Michigan Street, and Sophie's momma was explaining to Principal Davis why their daddy wasn't going to be on the emergency card. Her momma's voice was louder than Sophie was comfortable with, and she kept repeating, “He ain't here, so he ain't their daddy.” Once Sophie heard her momma tell Principal Davis, “They don't have no daddy. I'm the daddy.” Sophie and Simon looked at each other, and spoke no words. Sophie imagined Simon feeling confused and hurt like her. She did have a daddy. Her momma was not him, and she was so glad she really wasn't. She would find out in a minute why she and her brother were the office. For now, she had time to think about how his student-size wood chairs were still too close to his desk. She found herself kicking at it, stopping just short of hitting it. The room looked the same as what she remembered, too. The large rectangle window that faced the door was still covered with thin, light blue curtain. He had the window pushed open, slightly, so the curtains waved a softly from the breeze. Pushed up to the right side of his desk was a short bookcase full of thick books with titles that had the word education or equality in them. His walls were a pale yellow, bare except for a picture of a

thin, black, serious looking man with horn-rimmed glasses staring out into the room like he was thinking about something important to tell. Next to that picture, a new framed picture of Dr. King standing in a suit, behind a podium with a microphone on it. Sophie stared at this one because she was still stunned sometimes when she was forced, like now, to remember that Dr. King was gone.

On his desk, Principal Davis had a framed picture of him and a woman Sophie guessed to be his wife. He was younger and not as chubby. His cheek was pressed against hers. She wore a big blue church hat that didn't fit into the picture frame. They both had smiles that made it seem like they really liked each other. Sophie thought they looked happy.

"There's a visitor coming here to see you two, today, Simon and Sophie." Principal Davis sat in his big chair and swiveled back and forth. "He'll be here in just a minute." He looked at Sophie. "Ms. Sophie, you remember what we talked about last year at recess?"

"Yes, sir." She had remembered although she still didn't know what he'd meant by "tell it."

The principal's secretary pushed his door opened and following her was Mr. Spencer. Sophie's heart stopped for a couple of beats, it seemed. Principal Davis stood up.

"Simon and Sophie, maybe you know Mr. Spencer from the Department of Social Services?" He didn't wait for an answer." "He's here to talk to you two about some

things.” He pointed toward the last student chair next to Simon. “Mr. Spencer, have a seat, won’t you?”

Mr. Spencer picked up the chair and moved it away from Simon, but so that it faced Simon, Sophie and Principal Davis. “Thank you, sir.”

“Hello Sophie and Simon.” Mr. Spencer winked at Sophie. Sophie couldn’t help herself. She liked Mr. Spencer. It seemed somehow he was on her team.

“Hello sir.” Sophie and Simon spoke at the same time.

“Well, if you’ll excuse me, Mr. Spencer, I’ll let you talk to Sophie and Simon, alone. Just holler at me when you get through with your conversation.” Mr. Smith closed the door behind him. Sophie, Simon and Mr. Spencer were alone in the office.

Mr. Spencer pulled a yellow notepad from his black bag on the floor and flipped a couple of pages. He paused a minute, then closed the pad, pushed it aside and clasped his hands together.

“How have you been since I last saw you, Sophie?” There was that deep voice again that made Sophie think of some far off place.

“I’m fine.”

“What about you, little partner?” He looked at Simon now.

“I’m fine. Hey, how do you know my name?” Simon clasped on to the side of his chair and swayed side to side.

“Aha! We didn’t meet the day I came to your house, and I talked to your sister, but your mamma told me your name then.”

This information seemed to make Simon cautious because he stopped swaying and looked at Sophie. He'd looked at her before this way—it was the same way she'd seen babies look at their mothers' right before they started to cry. Sophie hoped Simon remembered what to say about her wrist. She was hoping, even though Mr. Spencer said he would come back to talk to her, that she wouldn't see him again. It was too late to tell Simon to remember to keep his mouth shut about what went on in their house.

“How's school for you so far, partner?” Mr. Spencer said.

“Fine. I'm in third grade this year.”

“What? Well, you getting mighty big. I bet you know how to multiply all your numbers?” Mr. Spencer tapped his clasped hands on the desk.

“Mostly all.” Simon started swaying again.

Mr. Spencer and Simon talked a few minutes about how smart Simon was, how he was practicing front flips, and how fast he could run. Then Mr. Spencer talked about when he was in elementary school and how much fun it had been except when he got a paddling for asking the teacher too many times to go to the restroom. She had gotten mad at him and paddled him.

“That's not fair!” Simon said. “Sometimes you just have to pee. That's not a good reason to get a paddle.” He stopped swaying for a moment. “One time I got paddled for talking in class, but my friend Rodney had asked me a question, and I turned around and answered him. My teacher didn't even see Rodney talk. I got it and he didn't.”

“Simon, isn't it funny how that happens?” Mr. Spencer leaned his elbows on his knees. “Simon, remember when your sister's wrist got hurt?”

“What?” Simon said.

“You know, Sophie’s wrist got hurt in the summer. Was the way Sophie’s wrist got hurt, fair?” He looked at Simon.

Sophie sat quiet.

“No, it wasn’t fair.” Simon said in the quietest voice Sophie had heard from him.

“Why wasn’t it fair, Simon?” Mr. Spencer’s voice was quiet, too.

Please God, make Simon shut up. Sophie prayed and looked at the clock. She swung her feet, twisted one of her braids, and swung her feet some more. She hoped the lunch bell would ring before Simon would get loose lips.

“I’m getting hungry,” Simon said.

Sophie looked at the big school clock on the wall. It was 11:04. Just two more minutes before the bell rang.

“Oh, don’t worry about lunch, Simon. I’m having it brought in so we can talk some more.”

“I don’t want to stay in from lunch. I want to go eat with my friends.” Sophie said.

“Yeah, I don’t want to stay in from lunch either. I only stay in from lunch when I get into trouble. Why are we here, anyway?” Simon stood up, pulled his pants out of his behind and sat back down.

“Simon, I need you to tell me what happened to your sister’s wrist.”

“Why?” Simon asked.

“Because sometimes adults like me try to make things fair for boys like you, and girls like your sister.

Simon sat quiet and played with a hanging thread on the seam of his Tough skins jeans.

One more minute before the bell. Now, Sophie just had to figure out a way to get out of the office when it rang.

“Simon, I really need you to answer that question for me, so your sister can’t get hurt anymore. You don’t want your sister to get hurt anymore, do you?”

“No, I don’t want So’ to ever be hurt.” Simon looked at Sophie.

“Shut up, boy, I don’t get hurt.” Sophie sent a fiery glare at her little brother.

The door opened and Principal Davis entered his office.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Mr. Spencer, but I’m going to have to use my office for some students who have gotten themselves into a little trouble.” Principal Davis stuck his hands in his pockets and pulled them out. Sophie thought he really sounded sorry. Simon jumped out of his seat. “Bye, I’m going to eat!” He slipped past Dr. Davis and out the door.

“Can I go?” Sophie said.

“Sophie, we will talk, soon,” Mr. Spencer said.

“Yes, sir.” Sophie said. She moved toward the door. Principal Davis moved to the left and she slipped out of the room. Once out, she ran down the hall and felt the freedom that a trapped wolf must feel after his paw is unleashed from a trap. Saved once again. How many more times would she be able to keep quiet, she didn’t know.

Sophie felt excited the day Ms. Sheila took her to get her stitches out. Rebie asked Ms. Sheila to take Sophie because the appointment was at 4:00 and Rebie's last hair appointment was at 6:00 p.m. Sophie didn't remember the shiny floors of Jefferson Community hospital, or how the walls near the elevator had colorful pictures of kids from different countries on them. They were smiling. When they got to the fourth floor where the doctor was, there were more pictures, but they looked like five-year olds had drawn them. They had crooked hearts and stick people and green lines at the bottom of the paper for grass. They reminded Sophie of how Simon used to draw when he was little. They sat in an office with a bed with white paper across it, a stool and a rolling swivel chair. The doctor came in with his stethoscope in his white smock jacket. He walked in the room so fast, his smock billowed out like a curtain blowing in the wind. Sophie thought he looked like the newsmen on television, flat, colorless hair, blue tie, and eyes that didn't smile.

"Well, hello there Sophie. Let's take a look at your wrist." He pulled a pair of silver scissors out of his jacket pocket.

Sophie showed him her wrist. He held it, and ran his forefinger along the top of the stitches.

"Perfect, let's get these threads out of here. Would you like that, Sophie?"

"Yessir. Can I have the thread?"

"What? Now that's a new one." He put her wrist down, and asked what she wanted the thread for. She told him it was so she wanted it as a souvenir.

“I’ll tell you what.” He reached in a cabinet above the sink. “Here’s a piece of new thread, all clean and tidy. You don’t want that old thread. It’s too dirty and not safe to keep.”

“Thank you, sir.”

That was it. Ms. Sheila told the doctor thank you and they left the hospital and drove home.

Chapter 10

November 1968

The first week after Mr. Spencer had come, Sophie half-expected to get called out of class to the office. After a while, when no such call came, she settled back into the regular worries about school work and catching up to Linda and the rest of her friends at recess and lunch. One afternoon after school, a faint breeze blew in through the front door while Sophie sat on the floor in front of the television doing her homework, Simon burst open the door. “Sophie, come look at something!”

“What do you want boy? I’m doing my homework.”

“Come outside and watch me, So.”

“This better be good, Simon. Sophie followed him outside.

Sophie sat on the front porch steps while Simon walked to the far end of the yard.

“Sophie, watch this.” He took a slight hop on one leg and with his hands in the air, took off at full speed. After about thirty feet, he flipped two times and landed on both feet, just where their car port ended.

“Where in the world did you learn that? Sophie clapped at her brother’s success. You are crazy, boy. But that was real good. You headed for the Olympics.”

“I know.” Simon dusted his hands, and poked out his chest. “I’m learning to flip backwards, next.”

A blue car with a tire hump on the trunk pulled up to the curb in front of the house. The Jackson 5’s “Dancing Machine” blared from inside the car. Sophie and Simon both looked at the car, then at each other. Sophie didn’t recognize the car and her momma

wasn't home. She thought it was Mr. Spencer, bothering them again, but a strange man stepped out of the car, pushed the car door shut, looked up and down the street, then at Sophie's house, then at Sophie, then at Simon. He waved.

"Hey there," the stranger said. "How're you doing sugar? I bet you don't know who I am?"

"Who are you?" Simon said.

"I'm your uncle." The man stayed by his car.

"Uncle who?" Simon walked a little closer to Sophie.

"I'm your uncle Danny. I'm your Daddy's baby brother."

Sophie heard uncle but daddy was the word that made her shoulders tingle. She still couldn't speak. The whole time she lived with her daddy out in the country, she had never met an uncle Danny.

"How're you my daddy's brother? Is our daddy with you?" Simon stretched his neck to look into the man's car.

Danny was neat. White big-sleeved shirt, tucked into tan slacks. He had thick side burns that were so perfect, they looked painted on. His short afro could only have gotten that round with a special hand mirror, a thin nylon scarf and a lot of time. Rebie sometimes wore an afro and Sophie had seen her spend many minutes in the bathroom patting it, looking at it from all angles and to finish off its perfection, she would lay a thin scarf over it, rub her hands over that, and lift it, carefully. Danny's brown eyes were easy to look at and he didn't smile, he grinned. He came around to the curbside of the car, leaned his back against it and folded his arms.

“Where your momma at, boy?”

“Sophie, where’s momma?” Simon said.

“She’s coming in a few minutes. You can come back when she gets here.” Sophie turned to walk up the porch steps, but turned back toward this uncle Danny just because she couldn’t help it. She had so many questions inside, her head started spinning, making her feel like she would fall if she were to take a step. Who was this man, really? Were his hands like her father’s? Was her father brown like him or darker? Did her father tuck in his shirt like he did? Did he look younger or older?

The sun was beginning to go down and Sophie rubbed her arms to warm them from the late September coolness. Her momma should be on her way home and she still needed to heat up the cabbage and chicken her momma had left for her and Simon this morning.

“Simon go inside and get that food out of the refrigerator and I’ll be inside in a minute.”

“So, I don’t want to go inside. I want to show you my flips again. Simon looked at Danny out the corner of his eye.

“Not now.” Sophie pointed at the front door. “Go on, get.” Simon dragged his feet up the porch steps and into the house.

“So sugar, you always so quiet?” Danny still leaned against his car.

“No,” Sophie said. Danny got off his car, and squatted on the curb.

“Well, sugar...I know you probably surprised to see me. I know it’s hard to believe I’m somebody who could be related to your daddy, but I am. And I am going to

tell you some things that you really need to know.” He shifted the weight on his legs.

“That is, after I talk to your momma. What you think about that, sugar?”

“Where do you live? How come we’ve never met you before? How long are you staying?”

“Whoa, there, baby girl. We’ll have to take it slower than that. I can’t answer all those questions right now.” Danny stood up, put his hands in his pockets and looked down the street, then up at the sky. “Sugar, what type of math are you working on in school?”

“We just started some Algebra, just about the missing number.” Why would he ask her about school? Was this another Mr. Spencer?

“Oh yeah, I really like Algebra. Have you heard of something called order of operations?”

“No.” She wanted to ask more, but didn’t.

“Order of operations just means there are steps you have to take before you get to the answer.” He stepped to the left and raised his hands. “If you follow all the steps correctly, you’ll get the right answer.” He stepped to the right. “If you mess up the steps, you get the wrong answer. It’s that simple.”

Sophie started rubbing the outside of her left hand. Her momma would be home any second, and Sophie couldn’t predict what she would do about this visitor and how much she would blame Sophie if he really was a stranger.

Danny knelt again, right in front of Sophie. “Sugar, I want you to let me go and talk to your momma because that’s the way I should do things so they come out right for everybody. You dig?”

Sophie giggled just a little. She hadn’t had an adult relative ask her if she dug anything.

The fender of Rebie’s Dodge scraped the driveway as she pulled into the carport. Sophie’s stomach turned as usual.

Rebie

Rebie had to focus better because she thought she saw Danny Brown standing on her lawn, talking to Sophie. That was a scene in a movie that hadn't been made. She put the car in park, hugged the steering wheel with her left arm while she fought to get the keys out of the ignition. The last time she saw Danny was at Ray's or what used to be Ray's club until the fire. That seemed a lifetime ago. The left side of her head started throbbing just thinking how there was that terrible mess, then, right after, Henry was out of her life. Had she really put the two events together until now—before seeing Danny in her yard? Funny what will trigger the truth. She turned the key again, once to the left and back to the middle, jiggled the steering wheel and her keys pulled free. Sophie hurried inside, while Danny approached her with his slow, slick walk that she remembered so well. It had the confidence of Henry, but with a little less drag. She always thought Danny's youth and freedom from a wife and kids gave his walk a lightness that she caught glimpses of in Henry, but soon after they were married, any lightness to his step had disappeared. Was Henry walking like Danny, now? A torrent of pain tore through Rebie's stomach just then, as she found herself fidgeting for her purse a little longer than she needed. The pain made her mad because she knew why it was there. She missed him. She missed how she had begun to feel more like a woman who meant something to somebody. The more time passed since he left, the more she realized she couldn't escape thoughts of him—their times laughing at whatever was on the television or drinking and playing cards with friends— and the meaner and more alone she felt. When she thought about his arm wrapped around her waist and the other one cradling the back of her head

while he looked at her and told her she was so fine, the more she hated the women she saw in the street who she imagined might be hearing those same words from him, now. They were who and where she wanted to be. Henry's woman, in Henry's arms.

Oh my God, what if he had another child by now? She remembered when she had gotten pregnant the first time and lost the baby. Henry had cried silently after the doctor told them the news. For her, the loss was her sign that she had been correct in assuming having babies was not for her. She didn't tell Henry how relieved she felt knowing she didn't have to carry that burden around for nine months, let alone take care of it afterwards. Then, she got pregnant again; her cervix stayed strong the whole pregnancy and she delivered an eight- pound baby girl. In the hospital, Henry was full of giggles and kept saying how much his little girl's eyes were like his and he wanted to name her. The nurse came by with the paperwork for Rebie to fill out and Henry stood next to the bed, holding the baby and looking over Rebie's shoulder. "Where do you write in the name?" He had asked.

Rebie said, "Here" and pointed to a blank line.

He handed the baby over to Rebie, took the pen and wrote Sophia Ann. "I always liked that name," he'd said. When the papers came back all typed and Rebie looked at the name, it read Sophie Ann Brown. Rebie told the nurse it was supposed to read Sophia. The nurse said that's not what was written, and if the last letter was an "a," she couldn't tell and it was too late to change it.

"Sophie? That's even a black child's name."

The black nurse looked at her, shrugged her shoulder and said, “It’s only one letter. Why can’t it be a black child’s name?”

Henry started repeating the name under his breath. “*Sophie. Sophie.*” Then he said, “I like it. It sounds soft and easy under my tongue. Yeah. I’m okay with it. She’s going to be my little soft bundle and I’m going to make her life easy and comfortable.”

Rebie felt a twinge right then in her shoulders, and the arches in her feet felt a sudden strain. Why should a child’s life be comfortable? Hers hadn’t been. How can a child learn how tough life is if her life is too comfortable? *Bullshit*, she thought.

All that sacrificing for him, having the girl, then Simon two years later. And for what? Even with all that she knew and felt, Rebekah knew that if Henry popped out of that blue Mark IV parked in front of her house, she would forget all of her anger, hurt, and confusion and run right up to him like Danny was rushing toward her now.

Rebie stepped out of the car and Danny grabbed her and squeezed her around her waist before she could put her keys in her purse.

“Rebie, girl, how have you been?”

Rebie’s arms found themselves around Danny’s neck before she had time to feel discomfort over the strangeness of him being there.

“How have I been? The answer to that question might take a long time to tell, Mr. Danny.” Rebekah stepped back and adjusted her purse on her shoulder. “Let’s start with you. Come inside and get away from these mosquitoes.” Rebekah walked past Danny and motioned for him to follow her. “I’ll pour you some iced tea. What in the world brings

you here to my house? How'd you even find me? What happened to you that night,
Danny Brown?

Chapter 11

Henry

1967

June's almost warm night air and the swamp cooler mugginess in Wilson's Joint soothed Henry's shoulders and arms, arms he had wrapped tight around Rebie's waist. Stale nicotine stench, sweaty polyester, and Old Spice blended and appeased Henry like the smell of Thanksgiving dinner sitting on his momma's kitchen table. There were barely any lights in the place. That's the way Ray Wilson liked it. "Keeps everybody calm and things a little mysterious, my brother." Henry thought sexy is what the dim lights made the place, especially when the cigarette smoke rose up and danced like little Casper ghosts next to him. Add holding Rebie close, his hand pressed into the small of her back, manipulating her curves real gentle like into his, or moving her into half -turns, to Retha's *Do Right*—and it was *sexy as hell*. The way her hips snaked up and met his middle was almost too much for him to handle. She had him pussy-whipped. Plain and simple. Which came first, his love for Rebie, or his appetite for her, he couldn't recall. "*If you want a dooo-right-all-day woman,*" He wasn't even sure if the two could really be separate or separated. "*...dooo right-all-night man.*" Her smell, her body, like the earth, her words, raunchy, like the dirt that made the earth. "*She's flesh and blood just like her man.*" A half-moan rose up in Rebie as Henry's groin warmed and hardened against her stomach. The cigarette smoke was awfully thick tonight, or Rebie had him in a bigger trance than usual. Tables and chairs made a half-circle around the dance floor and seemed to float in the smoke. He pulled Rebie even closer "*...it's a man's world.*" Her arms

rested on his shoulder blades, the tips of her fingers massaged his neck, just under his hairline.

“Jeez girl, you doing that magic shit to me again,” Henry said. He pressed his face into the soft part of her shoulder.

“I think that gin and tonic getting to you, baby.” Rebie nibbled the words on his ear lobe. Henry closed his eyes, laid his head in the crook of Rebie’s neck, kissed it. She tasted like salty oranges, hot salty oranges.

Not a moan this time— just hot breath on his shoulder blade – her reply to his touch.

Through his gin and tonic Rebie trance came a strange, frantic crackling. Like when water is dropped into a pan of hot bacon grease. Henry pulled away from Rebie’s neck, looked to Roy Wilkin’s window in the front of the club. A maddening *pop* then a shatter echoed deep in his ears, through his chest, and all the way through to his groin. Full blown orange flames blew through the open space where the window burst. A lady’s frightened voice rang out. “Fire, Get out! Bathroom!”

Rebie clutched Henry’s neck. He pried her wrist off of him.

Henry looked straight into Rebie’s stunned eyes. “Let’s go.”

In the instant Henry turned to find a path out of the club, as he held tight to Rebie’s wrist, the dance floor turned into a small mob of clamoring arms and elbows, and stomping feet, and confused cries.

“Everybody get out!”

“Go through the front!”

“No, the back!”

Fear welled up in his stomach, and his chest. Smoke began to blind his vision. He held fast to Rebie’s wrist.

“Henry!” Rebie gurgled his name.

Just then, the heavy weight of a man’s body came down on Henry’s fingers, and broke his clasp around Rebie’s wrist. The terror in her voice, his lost grip, threw Henry fully into a new state of consciousness. “Oh shit, Rebie! Rebie!” No response.

The flames grew taller and closer and so did the intensity of their sound. Henry was in the lake of fire he had feared so often in the dreams he’d had ever since that afternoon he’d lost his friend Toby’s grip in the Arkansas River. The flames from his dreams stood real in front of him. They rose up around him, red and orange snake dragons. They blew and turned everything around him into a million pieces of ash. His hand was out. “Rebie! Where are you?!” He didn’t hear her, just a thousand rumbling feet closing in on him. Glass jumped and popped. A piece caught him in his arm. He pulled it out, “Awww!” he screamed, and threw it to the floor. Blood streamed down his arm. He covered the gash with his other hand. Wood made thud sounds; pieces from Wilson’s ceiling cracked, split and tumbled to the floor. Henry ducked. Wilson’s place was burning up, and burning down at once.

Next to the bathroom and the burning wall, and through the smoke and flames, Henry caught glimpses of the night, outside. An old and sudden impulse clutched him. He moved toward the bathroom. Not toward the front of the crumbling building, where most everyone else was trying to crawl or leap to, or run. Flames raged next to the

partially open bathroom door; Henry hesitated then chose to move toward the opening, hoping for the miracle of finding Rebie and escaping the inferno. There was an old instinct within, too. There was an urge to go toward those flames that everyone else seemed to be moving away from. Was he having that old urge to find the bad guy, the bully who hurt the helpless? A split second of Toby, his friend, the white water, and his bulging eyes flashed in Henry's mind. He yelled "Rebie!"

The flames from the wall seemed higher, Henry squat-walked forward, he used his good arm as a shield in front of his face. His name? Had he just heard his name? Rebie? A sudden thrust to his back sent him stumbling toward the floor and grasping in the air for a wall that wasn't there. He managed to stiffen and straighten his back. A choked "Henry?" came from the figure. Ray Wilkin's, the club owner was gaining a clumsy balance next to Henry. His black-sooted face and terror stricken eyes spooked Henry.

"Keep moving, Ray," Henry choked. He threw his right arm over Ray. Ray returned the gesture with a survival instinct. He and Ray would get outside, get air, and come back in for Rebie. He just had to get Ray through the bathroom door, and out the back exit.

"Come on... the door's...open." Two more giant steps and they were there. They collapsed just outside the bathroom door, against the wall. Air and God. God was air. Henry breathed God into his lungs. He choked and began to spit out the hell he'd just left. He spit black onto the gravel. He wiped the sweat from his face. His back of his hand was charcoal black.

Ray Wilkin's chest heaved in and out. He lay his left hand on the gravel, open-palm. His gold wedding ring showed luster in contrast to his black hand that was covered with soot. Where was Rebie? Henry tightened his shoulders, and stared at Ray's ring as if it had the answer. He tried to bring up that sixth sense or that thing he had. The same thing that told him going through the bathroom to get to where they were, meant something; that it was more than just the way to get out of the club. Where was the same feeling he'd ignored that day in the river with Toby? The thing telling Henry how to he could save him. He needed it now, desperately, for Rebie. Henry clenched his fist, hard. Ray coughed, making his back jerk off the wall and then fall against it. Henry felt nothing. The sky was bright from the fire. White and black smoke billowed next to him and Ray. They couldn't stay there on the ground, against the wall, but Henry knew they wouldn't burn. He sensed the extra seconds he and Ray had been granted from the heavens to gather their energy, their wits. Sirens blared, and voices echoed in between the crackling flames and the falling building. Henry would have to depend on the paramedics to save Ray. The thought made him look at Ray's limp body. He quickly turned away. He had to find his wife. Jefferson county hospital would be filled with burn victims tonight, and Henry guessed there would be a few mothers coming to identify their baby's bodies in the morgue. He clenched his shoulders and fist one more time as he stared at Ray's ring. A piece of splintered wood from out of the sky stuck into Henry's arm, Henry pulled it, and flung it. It seemed to sail far into the night.

Henry's shoulders shook in little convulsions. He felt chills, despite the intense heat. "I got it. She's against a tree in the front of the club!" Henry yelled. "She's alive!"

“What? Who?” Ray said.

“Rebie! Ray. I’ll get you help. You stay put. I promise, I’ll get you help.” Henry’s heel scraped the gravel as he pushed himself up. He talked down at Ray. “I saw her, it was just a flash, but I saw her.” Henry said. He found himself begging his words.

Ray nodded his head from left to right as if to nod away reality. “My place is turning into a pile of nothing. Oh, God, is anybody inside?”

Henry nodded with more vigor.

“Just go!” Ray said. Go get her. Send somebody for me.” Ray’s head dropped toward the ground.

“I found you!” came a familiar cry.

From the billowing smoke, Henry recognized his baby brother Danny’s fro, then his tucked shirt, then his stocky arm.

“Grab my hand man.” Danny put his giant hand, his rescuing hand out to Henry.

“Man, help Ray, I’ll be ok. Rebie’s in the front. Have to get her.” Henry felt the strength come back to his legs that he hadn’t even noticed was gone. His chest moved in, then air passed through his nose freer than before. Even his eyes seemed to stop burning. With his baby brother, his partner in crime, his ace boon coon there by his side, he could do whatever he needed to do.

“Ray, let’s go. Let’s get you some help,” Danny said. He pulled Ray out of his vomit and onto his feet.

Ray let Danny pull him up. He kept mumbling, “gone, gone.”

Henry turned the corner to go to the front of the club and caught a glimpse of a green convertible parked in the grassy field, just a ways from the club. His shoulders shivered.

Heavy drops of water splashed on Henry's face; he touched it and rubbed the water between his fingers. "Was it raining?"

"Man, that's water from the fire hoses," Danny said. "The fire department putting it out." His sentences were getting shorter as he helped Ray away from the smoke. Ray was so weak; he was dragging his feet like he'd forgotten what they were for.

Danny took Ray to a paramedic truck parked in front of what was left of the club. This front view from Garvey Street, of rubble and embers, disoriented people, some stooped over, others on the ground with paramedics, made Henry feel like he was walking through the aftermath of war. The wall next to the bathroom that was fully ablaze before Henry escaped was a charred skeleton now. Pieces of debris still cracked off and fell to the ground. Two firefighters squirted water on a small section of red flames that tried to rise up from a pile of crumbled wood.

The four pine trees that had been on Garvey Street before Henry even cared that there was a Ray's Joint stood, untouched. Rebie was against the second tree, bent over, coughing and gagging, with one hand pressed against the tree's trunk. Henry recognized her ruffled halter-top, and her slender arm. He ran to her. "Rebie, Rebie! Baby!" His legs were heavy. He couldn't get there fast enough. She wasn't looking up. "Rebie, Baby." Something was wrong. The closer he got to Rebie, the heavier his legs became. His throat knotted up and he couldn't swallow. When she looked up, she might as well have been a

three-headed monster. The woman wasn't Rebie, just a woman wearing a halter like her, with her frame.

No air would pass through Henry's throat. He took hold of his neck with both hands. The lady's face began to blur in front of him. He stumbled back, and tensed his thighs with all his strength so he wouldn't fall into her.

"Ain't you Rebie's old man?" The lady took deep breaths, more like gasps and stayed bent over except to look at Henry. "She down there," she nodded toward the last pine tree, where, because of the darkness there, Henry had not been able to see a few seconds before. She must have seen Henry's sorrowful look. "Go on, get her," she said, "I'll be fine."

Her voice was like an angel. Henry massaged his throat, took in a big breath, stiffened his posture, touched the lady on her shoulder, and moved down the road.

He didn't yell Rebie's name this time. He didn't know if he could get her name out of his mouth without collapsing before he got to her. What if it wasn't her, again? He couldn't say it, not yet.

She was in a hide-and-go-seek position against the tree. Her little halter-top was ripped at the shoulder. Her culottes were smeared with dirt and black so badly, Henry had almost forgotten they were white underneath.

"Baby?" He knew it was her, but talked so softly she didn't hear him. "Rebie, it's me, Henry." He pulled ever so gentle on her shoulder.

Rebie lifted her head from the tree and turned to Henry. Rebie's threw her slender, dirty arms around Henry's sooty neck. "Baby, I thought you were gone." Her

weight was so heavy to Henry. Her embrace, to him, seemed more like a surrender, a letting go. He answered with a rigid, tight hold around her waist. His face buried deep into her neck where all the scents of the night were harbored. The fire, smoke, fear, maybe blood, and the faintest aroma of a perfume he'd bought her for her birthday, a reminder of how the evening had begun.

"I'm right here. Right here." Henry said.

"I didn't know...it's a miracle we both here." Rebie grabbed Henry by the neck again. "You hurt?" She took his hand and noticed the cut on his wrist. She gasped. "You need a doctor." He let go and roamed her face, her neck, her shoulders." I'm fine, what about you, baby?"

"I want to go home, curl up and go to sleep." Rebie said.

It wasn't the sassy, confident Rebie talking. It was a quiet, pleading, hopeful little girl, Henry thought he would melt from her helplessness. He wanted to blink and give his baby girl everything she wanted. He held her closer.

"Henry..." Rebie's body seemed to jolt in little shock waves. She fell from Henry and started coughing and spitting until it turned into a coughing spell.

"I'm getting a paramedic." He had a dilemma. He could leave her there, coughing and gagging for breath, and run and get help, or try to drag Rebie over to one of the trucks parked past the pine trees. Just then her hand closed down tight on his wrist.

"Don't leave me," she said.

"Okay, baby. Come on." He pulled her wrist around his neck, and dragged her, with her coughing all the way, to a paramedic

“Sir, my wife needs help.”

The man took a look at Rebie, removed his hat, threw it inside the cab of his truck. He filled a paper cup with water he poured from a thermos, and gave it to Rebie. She gulped it down. “Good ma’am, now put this on.” He pulled an oxygen mask out of his box, placed it on her mouth, and secured it with an elastic string around her afro. “Ma’am, I want you to breathe into this, and lean up against my truck.” He led her out of Henry’s arms and guided her to his truck. “Lean back, and relax, ma’am. He seemed safe to Henry. His greenish eyes didn’t avoid Henry’s, his hands were steady and gentle and unafraid to touch Rebie’s hair. He gave Rebie instructions, not commands.

“I need a little of that, sir,” He had almost cried watching his wife drink. Partly because he knew how much that water meant to his suffering wife and partly because he hadn’t realized his own thirst and suffering until he saw the gift given to Rebie.

“Here you go, sir..’ The man with the green eyes and gentle hands gave Henry a cup of water.

It tasted like life. It was the freshest, the most rejuvenating cup of water he’d ever had.

“Thank you, sir.”

“No problem, I’m here to help.”

A car’s engine revved loud behind Henry. When he turned toward the sound, Henry saw the mustang convertible idling across the street, near where he had left Danny and Ray. Henry’s shoulders jerked, and he felt chills on his arms. He dropped his cup and squeezed his shoulders tight. The unavoidable impulse was back and in control.

“Rebie, I love you. I’ll be back.” He searched his wife’s face as he jittered on the balls of his feet. “Do what the doc tells you, and I’ll be right back.” He squeezed her arm. He felt like a liar.

Rebie laid her hand over his and tried to talk from under the mask. Henry allowed himself to believe she was yelling *go, go* instead of *no, no*. Above the breathing mask, her eyes were like a hunted animal right before its capture. His heart tugged at him, but his impulse for flight was too strong. He had to go to the car he’d just seen, the same car he, Danny, and Ray had seen come from around the back of the club to Garvey St. He looked at Rebie one last time. He would come back for her. She was safe for now. There was comfort in that. Rebie pulled her mask from her face and reached a desperate hand out to him, “Henry!” Then she crouched over into a coughing spell. The green-eyed paramedic, who had been pre-occupied with writing notes and giving commands into his radio, rescued her by re-positioning the mask and leaning her back against the truck.

Henry took off down Garvey street where the Mustang sat parked facing the ruined club. The crunching sound his feet made as his heavy legs labored over the gravel and debris, filled his head. He wondered for a second if this whole night was real, if his legs were really moving or was he floating in a dream, or maybe the heaviness he felt in his legs was hell trying to pull him under. The two white boys, sitting in the front seat of the mustang, smoking cigarettes as Henry approached made his shoulders shiver and he knew everything was real. He remembered the car. It belonged to the sheriff’s twin nephews. What were they doing over here, on this side of town?

A young white boy's blond wiry head leaned out of the car, and with thick Starks City drawl, yelled, "What happened to your little club?" A maniacal laugh cracked through the air. Not even the start of loud sirens as the paramedic trucks, one by one, drove away into the night, concealed the boy's laugh. *What happened to your little club?* Henry looked around. Neighbors were out of their houses, assessing the wreckage in their neighborhood and Henry noticed others—brothers, sisters, mothers or cousins with folded arms and searching eyes asking for their people, who they were sure had come to the club that night. *What happened to your little club?* Henry felt a sudden awareness of what happened two weeks earlier when the sheriff's twin nephews had pulled into the Phillips gas station next to Henry and squinted hate stares at him.

"What you know!" Henry shot back, his hands clenched tight.

"Too bad everybody's not leaving here in a bag," The other boy in the passenger seat yelled.

One hundred feet. That's all there was between Henry and the car. He walked.

The lean, wiry blond-headed boy about Henry's age, got out of the car, threw down a cigarette, and stepped toward Henry.

Henry hit him. The power behind Henry's fist knocked the boy to his knees. He never waited for anyone to throw the first punch.

The second boy, with the same wiry blond hair, but bigger and slower, came around from the side of the car toward Henry with his fist in front of his face.

"You two did this, Big Hiram?" Henry said. He rubbed his right knuckle that was swelling and then held his fists out to his sides.

“Travis? Get up Travis!” Big Hiram said.

“What you need Travis for?” Henry held his position. His cut hand throbbed. It was all he could do not to scream out in pain.

“Shut up Hiram, don’t say nothing.” Travis pulled himself up on the Mustang side mirror.

Henry regretted that he turned toward his voice. In that instant, Big Hiram connected his fist to Henry’s temple. His whole body vibrated, the world outside seemed to compress and shove itself inside his head. He stumbled backwards. The boy’s face in front him fuzzed and stretched. Henry just needed two seconds to regain his composure. He backed up a little. Travis’ distorted mouth opened and closed. Warped words were coming from it.

“Come on, Henry. This day finally come. Hit me, now.”

A gun shot fired into the air. Hiram and Travis turned. Henry punched Travis square in his nose. Blood gushed. He fell to his knees, grabbed his nose and screamed in pain.

Starks City Police squad cars surrounded Henry and the boys.

Sheriff Cole Wheeler jumped out of one of the squad cars screaming, “Put your hands on the hood of the car, boy.” Henry knew the routine. Black man at the scene of anything is guilty.

The sheriff slammed Henry’s head against the top of the squad car. His mother’s words flashed through his mind. “*Beefs last past a generation,*” she’d said. “*Be careful*

'round here, son. Starks City law doesn't limit how a white man reckons his beef against a black man. The sheriff shoved Henry's head into the back of the car.

His head felt like it was being kicked down a gravel road. He wanted to throw up. His insides turned even more as he thought about Rebie. He prayed, God, please protect my wife.

Danny came running up to the police car waving his arms.

"Henry! Where you're taking him?" Danny yelled.

"Find Rebie, man! Please find her! I'll be okay." Henry screamed from the car window.

Too weak to say anything else, he laid his head back on the patrol car seat, physically exhausted, mentally defeated. The car drove into the dark.

Chapter 12

Sophie

November 1968

Inside, Sophie and Simon forked at their cabbage and rice. When her momma pushed the front door open and Danny stepped in, behind her, Sophie shoved a mouthful of cabbage in her mouth. The smile she tried to hide from her mother kept her from chewing the cabbage leaves all the way. The half-chewed leaves scratched down her throat. The cough that came next surprised her. She covered her mouth to muffle the sound from her momma. Simon shoved food down his throat like he hadn't eaten all day.

“What you eating so fast for?” Sophie asked, leaning close to his ear.

“I'm going to show him my G.I Joes and my Hot Wheels when I'm done.”

“Oh, really?” Sophie said. She leaned in close enough to smell the hair grease and sweat in Simon's hair. “He's not going to play with you. He's here to talk to momma about daddy.” She pushed herself up straight and gave Simon a “you'll see” nod.

“You almost finished, little girl? I have company and we need to talk.” Rebie set her purse down on the couch. “Danny, sit down. I'll get you a glass of tea. I guess you saw the kids, Sophie and Simon? They're bigger than the last time you saw them, when they were babies.” Rebie moved toward the kitchen, her eyes on the glass cupboard.

“I sure did meet the little tadpoles. They some smart kids, Rebie, and they're good looking like their momma and daddy.”

Sophie tried to look straight ahead to stay out of grown folks business, but uncle Danny's voice and his words floated across the room and turned her head around. She looked right into his mouth. He winked at her.

"They don't need to hear all that kind of talk. They just need to keep up them grades in school." Rebie said.

Had her momma seen that? Sophie jumped up from the table. "Simon, come on, let's wash the dishes.

Sophie put her and Simon's dishes in the sink and turned on the water just enough for it to have a mother hushing a baby sound.

"So, what are they going to talk about?" Simon whispered, handing Sophie his dirty cup.

"I don't know." Sophie dried and put away the plates while Simon dried and put away the silverware. The moon was full outside the kitchen window. It shone through the curtain like a nightlight. Sophie moved the curtain a little to take in its bigness. She liked the moon when it was full and bright and looked like it was sitting in her backyard. When she moved to this house with her momma and Simon, she used to pretend it was there to carry her back to her house with Grandma Ella and her daddy. She had almost forgotten that till tonight. Behind the clink clink of dishes, the deepness in uncle Danny's voice brought her back to the miracle that he was here at all. She giggled out loud at the thought of becoming Samantha on Bewitched and twinkling her nose so she could be invisible in the living room while her momma and uncle Danny talked.

"Rebie, girl, how are you? Why did you leave?"

“Why did you leave me?” Rebie said.

“I didn’t leave you, I went outside to get Henry before he got his behind killed.”

Danny said.

Sophie and Simon gave each other their brother-sister raised eyebrows side glance.

“Let’s go to my room, Simon, and turn on the TV real quiet.”

They walked past her momma and uncle Danny on the couch, Sophie forcing herself to look straight ahead like she had a stack of books to balance.

“There they go!” Uncle Danny was talking to Sophie and Simon like he didn’t know the rules.

“You two tadpoles not going to learn some more about your uncle Danny?”

Sophie looked at the floor.

“I want to know more about you.” Simon said. “You want to play with my Hot Wheels?”

Danny laughed out loud. His laugh echoed through the house like the big courthouse bell sounded on Main Street everyday at noon. Sophie’s eyes opened wide and stuck on her uncle.

“I almost forgot that laugh, Danny. That laugh’ll make anybody feel something good, even if nobody knows what you laughing at. These kids getting ready to go to bed, though.” Rebie got up from the couch. “I’ll make us a drink, and you get all your thoughts together, we have a whole lot to catch up on.”

“I’ll play with your Hotwheels fix, boy. I got a few tricks up my sleeve I need to pass down to you. Where those Hotwheels at?”

“In his damn bedroom where he ought to be. You two, get your asses in your rooms, and get ready for bed like you supposed to.” Rebie moved toward the kitchen. Simon hurried to his room. Sophie got stuck between Rebie and the hallway entrance. She waited for her mother to move.

“Come on, Rebie, now. Let me talk to my little niece and nephew a few minutes.”

Danny winked again in Sophie’s direction.

Had she smiled? Why was her momma glaring at her? She hadn’t winked at her uncle, he winked at her. If she had smiled, she hadn’t meant to.

“What in the hell you smiling at, little girl. That’s a grown ass man. Get your fast behind down that hall.” Rebie waved the two full glasses of brown liquid out in front of her, a small bit jumped out of the glass and onto the floor, making a small puddle in front of Rebie’s feet.

“Go get a towel and wipe that up. You the reason I’m spilling in the first place.” Rebie tip-toed over the small puddle and handed Danny his drink. Danny set it down on the coffee table.

Sophie didn’t know whether her momma meant a paper towel, or the dishrag. She did a quick eenie-meenie-minie-mo and chose the dishrag. She brought the towel out of the kitchen and knelt to wipe up the liquid. She couldn’t find it. The little puddle had been right where she stood, she thought. But, now she couldn’t see it. She felt a sudden urge to go number 2.

“What the hell you waiting on, little girl. Wipe it up.” Rebie drank from her glass.

“Rebie, I can’t even see that little old spill, anymore. How is the girl supposed to find it?”

“She better find it, or she’ll be finding a switch out in the backyard.”

Eenie, meenie, minie, mo, Sophie had two spots and mo chose the place she wiped. She knelt on her knees and wiped at the dry floor.

“Go get me a switch from the backyard.” Rebie flung her hand at Sophie.” That is not where the liquor spilled, you not paying attention as usual. Go get me a switch from the backyard.”

Chapter 13

“Simon, did you know our granddaddy knew how to play the piano real good?”

Sophie spread the peanut butter on Simon’s sandwich after school.

“What granddaddy?” Simon jumped on the cabinet to get a cup.

“Grandma Ella’s husband. That granddaddy.”

“Nope. I play that piano in Ms. Jones’ music room on music day. She said I play good.” He jumped down with his cup between his fingers.

“You got that from granddaddy.” Sophie finished Simon’s sandwich and handed it to him.

Simon stood on his toes and ran water into his cup.

“Oh.” He knelt in the chair at the kitchen table and tore a bite out of his sandwich. So, is momma coming home late or early? I want to play outside before it gets dark.”

“Sit on your behind, boy. Momma said she’s coming home late after she takes care of Grandma Cora.”

Sophie made herself a sandwich, and watched Simon finish his.

“What you looking at me for, So?” Simon said.

“Hurry up so we can go down to Linda’s. You can play with Rodney.”

“Let’s go.” Simon stuffed the last quarter of his sandwich in his mouth, giving him chipmunk cheeks.

They rushed out the front door, and stopped at the bottom of the steps. Rebie’s car crept down the street to the driveway and turned in.

“I guess we can’t go nowhere, now, So.” Simon turned to go back inside.

“Yeah, I hate her.”

“What did you say, So?” Simon said.

“Nothing. I really needed to talk to Linda.”

They went back inside. Simon got out his backpack, took out his reading book, and sat on the couch. Sophie went into the kitchen, got out the pinto beans and rice from the refrigerator to warm up for dinner.

Rebie opened the front door and Sophie felt the rocks in her stomach begin to move.

“Hi mamma.” Simon said from the living room.

“You doing your homework?” Rebbe set her purse on the couch.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Well, you stink. I smell you from here. Get your ass up, and run your bath water.”

Sophie wanted to run Simon’s water for him. She always did. Why was her mamma telling Simon to do it himself? Simon scooted off the couch, put his book back in his backpack and headed for the bathroom. Sophie heard the faucet turn and water running into the tub. Will he know to plug it up?

“Momma, I can run his water.”

“He needs to run his own damn water. He’s too big to have everybody else do his mess for him. Rebbe dug in her purse. She pulled out her pack of cigarettes, shook one out, and put it between her lips. “I have to take care of my grown-ass mamma because

she can't help herself. She's sick. But, dammit, there's not anything wrong with that boy. He needs to start taking care of himself."

The bathroom door shut, and Sophie imagined Simon was taking his clothes off. Remember to turn off the water. And, don't make it too cold or too hot. Turn off the hot faucet first. The beans were bubbling over and she turned the fire off. She walked into the living room to see Rebie's back turn into the bathroom.

"How can you be done that fast? Get back in that tub and scrub." Water splashed.

"Why are your ears so damn dirty?" Rebie said.

There was a sound that came from the bathroom that sounded like a dog yelping. After a minute, it came again.

Sophie put the spoon down she was using to stir the beans and ran to the bathroom. Rebie was bent over the tub, one knee on the floor, holding Simon's head with one hand and holding a Q-tip with the other.

"Be still before I give you something to scream about." Rebie said. Tears flowed from Simon's closed eyes. Rebie dug the Q-tip past the opening of the ear, and pushed hard. Simon cried out, high and wild.

"Momma stop, you're hurting him. Please stop!" Rebie whipped around, losing her grip on Simon. She glared at Sophie. Sophie stood.

"This boys ear's are filthy and he needs to learn to clean them. And if you don't get your little ass out of here, you better."

Behind her momma, Simon held his ears and cried in a low buzz that sunk into Sophie's head. She wanted to quiet that buzz. This is Simon. This is Simon. His buzz and her thoughts made her feel crazy. She stood.

"Get out of here before you get it girl." Rebie dried her hands on the drying towel Simon had lay across the tub. "Simon get your ass out that tub and don't let me see all that wax in your ears anymore. You hear me?" Rebie walked through the door, past Sophie and into her bedroom.

"Simon stop crying. Get dressed before you get cold." Sophie gave him his towel. He got out of the tub, dried off, his hands and his feet wrinkled from staying in water too long, and his face trembling from crying. They didn't see Rebie for the rest of that evening.

Sophie went back to the kitchen to get dinner ready. Simon was there within minutes. "Hey Simon," Sophie said.

"Hey So, how'd you know I was in here?"

"Because your feet crack when you walk."

"They do?"

Sophie handed Simon his beans.

"So, you think stuff is wrong with me?" Simon looked at his feet.

"What you mean?"

"I mean, like how you say my feet crack. Momma says my ears is always dirty."

Sophie leaned against the kitchen counter with the drying towel still in her hand.

“Nothing wrong with you Simon. I guess something would be wrong with you if you killed cats like I heard Casey does at school.”

“I don’t really like cats but I don’t feel like killing any.”

“Exactly, you’re a regular boy who does real good flips.” Sophie said.

“I’m better at my flips, now. I can jump higher than the last time I showed you.”

Simon raised his arms.

“Show them to me tomorrow, little brother.”

“Okay, So.”

Chapter 14

Rebie

Rebie's eyes squinted at the glow at the end of her cigarette. The first inhale always felt the best. Instant calm came from the inside out. First her head cleared, then the tension in her shoulders relaxed. Kids were at school. The house was quiet, the smell of the oatmeal Sophie had made for her and Simon lingered through the house. The morning sun pressed through the living room window. Rebie swatted at the little highway of smoke and dust particles that stretched in front of her. She didn't have to go to the beauty shop till the morning. The thought of going back to bed where she could close her eyes and be in the dark of sleep, crossed her mind, but the nicotine high won out so she sat there, on her couch, peeking through the white curtains every now and again to look out at the mailbox or Ms. Hattie's mums across the street or, at nothing in particular.

It had never occurred to Rebie that she might have to help care for her momma already. She'd just had her 35th birthday last month, in October, and had been taking care of her momma for a whole year before then. Her mama had to have a stroke at fifty-three, not really an old woman yet, just to fuck up Rebie's life a little more than she already had. The phone call from Ms. Smith, her momma's next door neighbor who was with her at the grocery store that hot June afternoon last summer was probably the most unwelcome call Rebie had ever received. She wanted to say "You have the wrong number" and hang up. Instead, she asked, "Is she at Jefferson?"

"Yes, she seem pretty bad off, so you better get over there," Ms. Smith had said.

“Sophie, you and Simon stay in the house till I get back.” Rebie grabbed her purse and drove over to Jefferson County hospital to see if her momma was dead. Rebie followed the nurse through the emergency room double-doors, made a quick right past two beds and stopped in front of the third. Her momma tried to speak but there were no words, and a droopiness to one side of her mouth. But, she was far from dead. Rebie had been chained to caring for her since that day. Her daddy gone years before, and no other children to look after her left Rebie no choice but to traipse over to the other side of town on 25th street every evening after work to make sure her momma had food, water, and hadn’t peed all over herself. If she didn’t do it, people would talk. And when people talked in Starks City, it was like trying to stop an infestation of roaches from multiplying. You would need to exterminate the whole town to kill the talk.

When she was little, she used to peek out of the front window of her momma and daddy’s little A-frame house on Fluker Street, the way she was peeking out of her curtains, now. She used to wait for her daddy to come home from work. He did until she was fourteen.

Starks City, 1958

“Daddy, you home?” Rebie yelled from inside the screen door.

Across the overgrown yard and the water-filled ditch, Rebie’s daddy got out of his pick-up swinging his lunch pail over one shoulder and carrying his tool box in his other hand. He stepped over the ditch and onto the lawn. Rebie smiled from the screen door. She remembered running over to meet him just a few years ago, but she was too old for that now.

“Who you see walking toward you, girl?” Her daddy, June Bug Titus walked tall and lean toward her. His dark, droopy blood shot eyes caught glimpses of the September sunset glow as he came toward the house. Rebie liked when the light and his eyes met. It gave him a little boy look instead of a tired daddy look.

“You.” Rebie said. She could smell sweat and car engine oil. It was familiar and comfortable.

“What’s the answer to your question then?” He smiled.

“I guess you home.” She waited for the usual invitation.

“Give me some sugar, girl.”

Rebie pecked her daddy on the forehead.

June Bug pulled the screen door open. “Get your momma for me baby while I take off these work shoes.”

Rebie knocked twice on her momma’s door. “Momma?” No answer. She could feel anger rise up in her, it was coming quicker and quicker lately. She could picture her momma with her head in her newspapers or in one of her books she was reading from the

Starks City College she where she had insisted on taking a class or two from this semester. She knocked again. She loved her daddy, but hated when he made her his fetch momma girl.

“Yep, open it!”

Rebie opened the door and smirked. Her momma looked up from her bed, surrounded by a mess of newspapers. She twirled a pencil in her fingers like it was a baton. Her eyes were glassy and far away, the look she always had, after she had been locked in her bedroom all day.

“Daddy’s home. He wanted me to get you.” Rebie said.

“Your daddy’s welcome to come in here and tell me he’s home.” She occupied herself with the paper in front of her. “His room, his house.” Cora underlined something. Rebie held the doorknob tight till she could feel the grooves from the old knob scratch the inside of palm.

“Yes, ma’am. You want me to tell him? Down the short hallway, out the corner of her eye, Rebie saw her daddy take off one of his work boots.

“Cora, you coming out here? Is there any food tonight, or you studying again? June Bug, yelled. “Rebie, come on away from there.

“You home for the night?” Cora shouted from the bedroom.

Rebie wandered into the kitchen and pretended to look for something in the refrigerator. Cora came out of the bedroom with her half-folded newspaper and her pencil.

“Well?” Cora said.

Rebie thought she wouldn't be home either if she was married to someone who didn't pay attention to her. She had decided a long time ago that it was her daddy who was right in these arguments.

“You decided to come out of there, huh? June Bug pulled off his other boot and grunted.

Rebie watched her momma.

“I been reading about what's going on with this desegregation law in Topeka, Kansas. Seem like it's getting some attention.” Cora pulled on the light bulb chain on the living room ceiling.