

# RENOVATION

by

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This creative thesis consists of the beginning of a novel and sections that will be used in the creation of a whole narrative. RENOVATION is a story of several characters' experiences in the surrounding areas of the same North Carolina town. Each character is in need of or is undergoing a renovation. RENOVATION explores the changing of the South in a postmodern world. This narrative is also concerned with how Southerners have chosen to adapt with the changes in the economy in the beginning of the twenty-first century, while also examining the consequences of drug addiction and alcoholism.

RENOVATION

A Creative Thesis

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Master of Arts in English- Creative Writing

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# RENOVATION

## Part I

~ *One Room at Time* ~

Jackson ran through the door straight to the kitchen for his water bowl. Clint walked in after, threw his keys on the kitchen table, and went to the refrigerator for a beer. He twisted off the cap to a bottle of Budweiser and let the cool King run down his throat. He finished the twelve refreshing ounces in one more gulp.

“Nancy?” he yelled. “Nancy, you in the house?”

“In the shower, Clint. Out in a minute,” Nancy hollered.

Had it been winter, Clint would have asked her to save some hot water, but on a day like today, he’d probably take a cold shower anyway. He opened the refrigerator door and reached for another beer. Nancy burst out of the bathroom and ran to the kitchen in her towel.

“Will you hand me one of those?” she asked, dripping water on the floor.

She grabbed the one out of Clint’s hand instead of waiting, and took off back to the bathroom leaving wet footprints behind her. She’d drink it while she put her face on and did her hair. The hair dryer turned on. Clint turned his second beer up. After a good twenty minutes, the bathroom door opened again and Nancy went to the bedroom. Clint walked down the hall trying to avoid the spot in the floor that always creaked and went into the bedroom. He took off his dirty t-shirt.

Nancy looked over her shoulder; she couldn’t help but notice his body. Each muscle was sculpted not by hours in the gym, but defined from real man’s work—built from work he’d done all his life. Clint was a tall man, 6’4”. He had brown hair and the bluest eyes. This combination was Nancy’s favorite, but not her only weakness. Clint was all of what a good strong man should be and Nancy knew it, but took it for granted.

Nancy's wet towel lay on the bed and she was flicking through hangers on her side of the closet. Clint had plans for a master bedroom suite to be added onto the house next. Then Nancy would have a big walk-in closet. Clint stepped behind her, put his strong arms around her waist, and pulled her towards him. Nancy wiggled and swatted at his hands.

“Quit, Clint! You're all sweaty and dirty. I just got out of the shower. Let me get dressed.”

“What you getting dressed for anyway?”

“I'm gonna run out for a little while. You seen my good pair of jeans?”

“Where you going? And why you need to wear those jeans? Your other ones are on the chair right there.”

“I just feel like getting out the house for a little while. I've been here bored all day.”

Clint took his wallet and a handful of change out of his Dickies work pants and put it all on the dresser. He sat down on the edge of the bed, pulled his dusty grease-stained pants off and threw them in the dirty-clothes-basket.

“Well, where you wanting to go?”

“I dunno, just out for a little while.”

“If you hold up a minute, I'll be out the shower real quick and we can go into town, get some dinner or something.”

Nancy pulled the V in her shirt down to show a little more cleavage.

“Clint, I'm ready though. I don't feel like waiting and I'm not gonna be long anyway.”

“That's what you always say, then you come stumbling in—late as hell when I got to get up in the morning. If you even make it home—”



“Clint, I promise. I really ain’t gonna be long this time. I’m just gonna run down to RJ’S and grab a beer with Karen. I already talked to her and she’s waiting.”

“What the hell are you talking about? Karen’s out at her mamma’s taking care of her. Betty Lu’s sick; Joe told me so at work today. Where you really going and who you really meeting? I’m not dealing with this shit again, Nancy. You end up drunk out at Bobby’s trying to score some coke again—”

“I’m just going to RJ’s for a beer and a game of pool and I didn’t say Karen, I said Kara.”

“Well, just hold up a minute, Nancy. It’ll only take me a minute. We haven’t played some Nine-Ball in a while. It’d be fun and I could stand getting out of the house for a bit myself. You wouldn’t believe work today—”

Nancy interrupted, “I want to go by myself, Clint. Just girls tonight. It’s kind of like a girls night out. We’re gonna start doing it every week. Just girls.”

“If I ain’t going, you ain’t either, Nancy. You can stay home tonight. That new show you like is coming on. I’ll watch it with you if you want.”

“You’re just being stupid, Clint, and you know you ain’t going to watch *Nip/Tuck*. It was last night, anyway,” Nancy said as she walked over to him. She pulled on the waistband of his boxers with two fingers. “We aren’t gonna be long, I promise,” she said softly as she looked up at him with her big doe eyes. They worked right into him. His hands rested against her hips, then strayed down to the top of her ass.

“I’ll only be a minute, Nancy. Just let me wash today off real quick and we’ll go up to RJ’s together. That way you don’t have to take the Mustang down there. I’ll drive.”

“Ok, fine, Clint. Have it your way, but you ain’t gonna want to listen to us chatting,” Nancy said.

Clint went across the hall to the bathroom. He stepped out of his sweaty boxers and kicked them towards the wall. He turned the shower on in the big antique tub. He stood there beside the tub and watched the water gather and swirl down the drain.

He wanted to open the bathroom door and see if she was waiting. He wanted to look down the hall and see if she was in the kitchen chugging another beer so she could get drunk for cheap at the bar, but Clint knew better. He stepped over the edge of the tub and leaned his head against the pipe underneath the showerhead and let the cold water wet his head and run down his face. He liked watching the water turn gray as the dirt and grease from a hard day's work at the mechanics shop washed away. He scrubbed it off his arms. Hot water would have helped to get him clean a bit faster, but Nancy wasn't waiting anyway.

The water finally began to warm as Clint rinsed the last of the soap out of his hair and scrubbed his fingernails with Nancy's pink Mary Kay nailbrush. She hated it when he used it, but he always did anyway. Soon enough he'd be signing a check for another one she'd order along with a bunch of other female beautifying products that were unnecessary. That junk made Nancy happy, but the only thing he saw that they were good for was cluttering up the whole bathroom despite the double sinks and the vanity he had put in.

He had redone the bathroom just so Nancy could have her own sink and side of the counter. Yet, all her junk was still migrating towards his side. All he kept was a razor, a bottle of Barbasol, a toothbrush, a tube of Colgate and a stick of Old Spice deodorant. The bathroom that he planned to add on with the new master bedroom was going to be set up completely different.

He didn't bother to hurry. Nancy would already be gone when he got out. Money would be missing out of his wallet, and all the quarters out of the pile of change he had put on the

dresser would be missing too. Nancy always took them so she didn't have to make as much change for the quarter-table down at RJ's.

Clint stepped over the side of tub. His feet made big wet footprints on the embroidered bathmat that matched the curtain over the window by the toilet. It was some Martha Stewart set that Nancy had gotten from Wal-Mart that had a matching soap dish, hand towels, washcloths, regular towels, and even matching decorative knobs for the towel bar, shower curtain rings and toilet paper holder. Nancy had insisted that she get a whole new theme for the bathroom when Clint had redone it. She had promised it was going to feel and look like a spa, but it didn't. It ended up more like a poorly decorated, cheap hotel bathroom, one that some granny or even a child would have decorated.

Nancy had ruined all his good work, and still all she did was complain about it. Complain that he hadn't pushed the wall out far enough. "Just two more feet" would have done it and if he had only moved the toilet down "just a little bit more to the left" of the sinks. Clint had re-tiled the whole thing. He had searched for months to find that antique tub. He wanted an original one with the claw feet, not a remake. When he had finally found one, he and Joe moved it from an old farmhouse that was coming down to make room for the new part of the Highway 64. The new bypass was going to cut right through Chatham County. The land that had been a part of him his whole life was being paved and bulldozed right on through. Clint had also pulled an antique bureau out of another old farmhouse several miles away. It was being torn down because HWY 15-501 was being widened into four lanes. The bureau was the perfect bathroom vanity. He refinished it and tiled the top of it before he put the double sinks into it. The bathroom had been unique, classic and classy until Nancy had ruined it with the Martha Stewart bathroom-in-a-box crap.

Clint rubbed his deodorant on and tried not to notice Nancy's decorative touch. He left his five o'clock shadow—it was after 7:30 by now. He never knew a nine-to-five day. He always got to work early and left late. When he'd get home, he'd do more work around the house and in his gardens. Nancy liked the roughness on his face. She liked it when the bristles scratched her neck when Clint kissed her, but he couldn't remember the last time she had told him so.

He wrapped his towel around his waist and opened the bathroom door, hoping Nancy would be in the kitchen sitting on the counter chugging a beer in those jeans that did make her ass look good, even if she was annoyed. In the bedroom, he looked at the dresser. The quarters were all gone, just like he knew they would be, and his wallet was on the opposite side from the one he had left it on. He hated how he did things like that these days—making mental notes of just how and where he left things so he would know when Nancy had been into them. He would have given her whatever money she wanted.

Clint was disappointed, but he was getting used to that feeling these days. He wasn't going to bother calling down to RJ's or driving down there. Hell, that might not have been where Nancy had gone anyway. Jackson, the yellow dog he had found on the side of the road years before, came to the doorway of the bedroom and made a groaning, low-pitched whine that rolled out of the back of his throat with a slight howl at the end. The dog looked up at Clint like he wanted to ask or tell him something.

"I know, boy. I don't know why I put up with it either. But that's Nancy. She been around longer than you have." Jackson tilted his head to the left and made a groan again, this time a little bit different. "You're right. You are better to me. Come here, boy." Jackson came quickly over to Clint and leaned into his leg. "I know, boy. I know." He rubbed Jackson's head so his ears flopped up and down.

He pulled a pair of Levi's out of the dresser drawer and put them on. From the closet, he got a plaid shirt with snaps up the front and threw it on, not bothering to button it shut. He put on his boots and walked down the hall to the kitchen, stepping over the spot in the floor again. Jackson followed right behind him. He slid the glass doors to the back porch open and picked up the little cooler that lay open and upside down and went to the fridge. From the freezer, he pulled out the bag of ice he had brought home the night before and poured half of it into the cooler. He opened the fridge. Inside, there was almost one of every size of Budweiser—bottle or can, including a half-empty 40oz that Nancy hadn't finished. She was always drinking those damn things. She'd run up to the store several times a day with handfuls of change to get them. Clint pulled the regular 12oz longnecks out and started shoving the bottles down into the ice, then added the only 12oz can and a leftover tall boy.

“This way we don't have to come back inside, boy. We can just sit on the porch and listen to Johnny and Willie and maybe some Doc and not have to go back in. Just relax. Don't that sound good, boy?” Jackson tilted his head looking up at Clint, who now sat at the table rolling a spliff. The dog knew what he was saying and stood up and wagged his tail probably hoping for an evening ride in the back of the truck, but a summer night on the porch would do him just fine.

Clint stood up and tucked the spliff behind his ear. He got a pack of smokes from the freezer and packed them tightly, hitting them against the palm of his hand over and over again. From his pocket he pulled out the Zippo lighter that had been his pa's, flipped the lid up and struck it down his right leg, rolling the rough wheel against his jeans fast enough to catch the flint. He pulled hard on the now lit smoke, inhaling the Marlboro Red deep into his lungs. He held it there for a while and then let it out as he left the kitchen.

The moonlight was beginning to show through the skylights he had installed in the newly remodeled living room. He had gotten them salvage too, just like the tub and the bureau for the bathroom. Clint had taken the whole ceiling out over the front part of the house, which was the floor to the attic. He didn't use it anyway, so why not open up the whole room vertically? He had removed all of the ceiling joists and found beautiful, natural beams that looked like whole trees from a sawmill several towns over. He replaced the original supports and vaulted the ceiling when he had installed the skylights. He and Joe had cut into the roof and dropped them in. The two of them had done it all in one weekend, and Clint had repaired and re-shingled that side of the roof after work the following few days. Clint could do just about any project he wanted to, even if he didn't have experience doing it or if he didn't know how. He'd always figure it out or redo it until he got it right. Clint was smart and he was good with his hands. That was something Nancy had chosen to ignore. Clint could barely remember how smooth her Mary Kay skin felt to them.

Nancy had been worried the whole house was going to fall down. She shouldn't have cared—it wasn't like any of it was hers, anyway. She was just worried about having a place to keep her toiletries and clothes, a place where she could get drunk and not do anything all day, a place to call home where she knew she could sleep, a place where a good man would always be to take care of her. But Nancy wasn't doing anything she had planned or told him she would. She wasn't working on selling her Mary Kay products. All she was doing was drinking. It wasn't as bad in the beginning and Clint hadn't minded. He liked having a woman around the house when she first moved in, which wasn't long after Clint had moved in himself.

When his father died, the small farmhouse and surrounding acreage was left to him. Clint had sold the house he was living in at the time, packed up, and he and Jackson had moved ten

miles down the road. It wasn't the family home he had grown up in. It was the second farm, Aunt Lissy's farm. Pa's Aunt Lissy had left it to Pa when she had died, not having any kids of her own. Growing up, Pa had helped her with the horses and done all the upkeep until she died. It had been Clint's responsibility too growing up, so naturally, his dad left it to him. Leaving it for Clint's mom to deal with or splitting it between Clint and his sister didn't make any sense. Clint had worked on it, with it, and unknowingly, for it his whole life, just like his pa.

Things had been bearable between Clint and Nancy until about six months after she moved in. That's when Clint saw how Nancy really was, not that he didn't know all along, but until recently, he thought he could change her somehow—perhaps even save her. Clint thought that having the farm would let them build a home and a family and that Nancy would settle down. There were good times when Clint's dreams looked like they'd come true, but the past year or so things were just getting worse and worse. Nancy was falling deeper and deeper into the bottle. He didn't know if she was drinking off of it or if it was drinking off of her, and Nancy didn't care. He still put up with her. He loved her.

Clint had also added a wall of windows and in the middle of them installed a pair of French doors that opened up onto the huge porch that wrapped around three sides of the house. The deck had several different levels and extended out into the front yard. He had built it around one of the trees that grew closest to the house. The tree grew up and through the deck and Clint had built a bench around the trunk but left plenty of room for it to keep growing. This was on one of the lower levels of the deck. This level was only two steps down from the main portion of the deck. He had built it out in an octagon-shape and had built benches along the base of the railing. Over on the left side was a new grill he had gotten to replace the old one just before the 4<sup>th</sup> of July cookout three weeks ago. The cookout had turned out to be a disaster.

Nancy had gotten drunk and acted like a fool. She accidentally knocked Clint's niece, Caroline, down the top portion of the stairs. The little girl had tumbled all the way down to the platform at the bottom of the first set of steps. Cassie, Clint's sister, overreacted when her baby girl took the fall and snapped at Nancy. Nancy exploded and belligerently barked right back at her. It was all over from there.

Nancy continued to make a drunken ass of herself. She blew up and started raising hell, screaming and yelling like drunk Nancy always does. Then she had jumped in the car and driven out of the driveway kicking up dust like a damn idiot and barely stopping to make the turn onto the road. Ray had called Clint from RJ's later that evening to come get Nancy off the bar after she had broken several glasses and cracked the face of the old jukebox with a pool cue in some spontaneous fit of rage. Clint went and got her. The next day, he and Joe drove back down to RJ's and got her car, changed the two flat tires and brought it home while Nancy stayed in bed all day crying with a pink Mary Kay ice mask on her eyes and sneaking sips from a pint of vodka she thought Clint didn't know she had.

Clint hoped tonight would not be a replay. He walked over to the stereo and turned it on after making sure the discs he wanted to hear were loaded in and in the order he wanted. He missed the sound of vinyl records. There was just something about putting the needle down as the record begins to spin that he loved—maybe it had something to do with him watching his father do it every evening after a full day's work. He pressed play, picked up the cooler, and walked over to the French doors. He went out onto the porch and took a seat in the rocking chair that he always sat in. It was Pa's before it was his. Aunt Lissy's rocking chair had been moved inside to the living room now where it rested with a family quilt folded over the back of it more



or less for decoration; no one ever sat in it. Jackson followed closely and settled down right beside him.

“Let me get a beer, boy,” he told Jackson. Confused, Jackson looked at him, but got up and moved towards the cooler. He lifted the lid with his snout and pulled a bottle out with his mouth. He dropped it on the deck as it came over and caught the cooler’s edge. Clint had been working with Jackson on this trick forever. Clint never closed the cooler all the way so he could get the lid up and usually left at least one of the bottles with its neck sticking further up than the rest of them. There had been better attempts, but Jackson was being lazy with the summer heat.

“Good boy, Jackson.” Clint picked the bottle up and twisted the cap off with his teeth. He took the cap from his mouth and flicked it into the tin pail that was also an ashtray. “See that, Jackson? I never miss.”

Clint sighed. Maybe it was the heat of late July that was getting to him or maybe it was Nancy getting to him. Whether it was her or the weather didn’t really matter. Clint sat on the porch listening to music, drinking cold beer out of the cooler, and chain-smoking cigarettes with his dog. Troublesome thoughts started running through his head, and not just because he was on his way to drunk. He was tired of this mess. He was tired of Nancy being Nancy. He was tired of putting up with it.

“Jackson, can you believe that no good . . . Things are gonna start to change around here. Mark my words, boy. Things are about to change.”

~ *Sins and Frames* ~

Nancy pulled into the gravel lot in front of RJ's and slammed on the brakes, not paying any attention to where she parked the car. She slid the gear shift into P, flipped the visor down, and opened the mirror. The light barely came on. She took out a new shade of Mary Kay lipstick that she had just gotten in the mail out of her makeup bag. She smoothed the new shade, Sunburst, over her big lips. She had originally started the Mary Kay thing because she was going to sell the crap and get other women to do it too, but instead she just bought all of it and never signed anyone else up.

One more boob pull up and perk. She pulled the V even further down this time and tucked her shirttail far into her jeans. She slid her hands over her stomach to make sure it was completely smooth. Her shirt was tight against her body. Nancy made sure the V showed as much cleavage as possible, threw the Sunburst into her bag, and got out of the car. She lit a fresh cigarette and walked towards the door like she was Sissy from *Urban Cowboy* heading into Gilley's.

She went straight to the bar. "Hey, Ray. Let me get the usual," she said. "Actually, make it a double."

"All right, Ms. Nancy. How you doing tonight? Clint couldn't make it out?"

"You know he never wants to do nothing," Nancy lied. Ray put a cheap plastic cup in front of Nancy. "I'm still not allowed to have a glass?"

"You're lucky I'm giving you anything at all."

Nancy squeezed the wedge of lime into it and asked for another one. She leaned over the bar, reached for a beverage napkin, and wiped the limejuice and the few bits of pulp off her

fingers. She squeezed the second one and then wiped her fingers on her jeans behind her knees.

“Thanks, Ray. So, who all’s been in tonight? You seen Luke around?” she asked.

“Naw, haven’t seen him.”

“Don’t give me that look, Ray. It ain’t none of your business anyway.”

“Anything that goes on in this bar is my business, Nancy. Don’t start up so early. You already been drinking, huh?”

“Only a beer at the house. Best behavior—swear. Scout’s honor,” She said holding her right hand up. She jumped down off the stool and winked at him.

“Yeah right, Nancy. Your best behavior ain’t so good anyway.”

“Now, don’t start up with me so early, neither, Ray. I ain’t in the mood. I’m just trying to rack a few and have a good time.”

“Rack a few what?”

“What? I heard that.” She walked away tossing her hair.

She crossed the room to where the pool table was and knelt down to put the quarters in. The balls rolled out from behind the plastic window down to the end of the table. She put the triangle on the table and racked the balls. Lowest solid then striped pair, solid, stripe, eight ball in the middle. After removing the triangle, she walked over to the rack of pool cues and took her favorite 21oz down. She rolled it across the table just to make sure it was still straight. It wobbled a bit, but not much, not enough to make her pick out another one. She went to the wall, rubbed her hands on the cone of white chalk, and returned to the table where she leaned her cue before going back to the bar for another double.

“Ray.”

“Don’t you want to slow down? You ain’t been here ten minutes.”

“Just give me another one. I don’t need no babysitter. I’m grown.”

“Just trying to look out for you. I ain’t calling Clint to come pick you up later.”

“You won’t have to. Luke should be through that door anytime now. He’ll give me a ride if I can’t drive.”

“Yeah, and I know what type of ride you’re looking for. And, Nancy, you know that ain’t right. Clint’s a good man; I have no idea why he puts up with your crazy ass anyway. If it weren’t for him—”

“Screw you, Ray. Just give me another drink,” she said, cutting him off. Ray poured Nancy another double. She overtipped him, thinking maybe it would smooth things out. She took her drink. “Thanks,” she said, and went back over to the table and lined up her cue to break the triangle of balls.

“Ugh! That was horrible.” Not a single ball fell into any pocket. They barely split apart at all. Thinking some music might improve her game, she walked, with her cue in hand, over to the jukebox and inserted a dollar. “Only three plays for a dollar on this new thing, Ray? That sucks!”

“Well, if you hadn’t of broke the other one. Just listen to what I got on then. Save your dollar.”

“Naw, I’m sick of listening to Hank Williams. That’s the same thing you always got on.” She navigated through the selections of the new digital jukebox and then complained about the extra credit it took to play the song she wanted because it wasn’t listed on the albums available. Back at the table, she took her first shot. She missed as Drivin’ and Cryin’ began to play “Straight to Hell.” She sang along:

*I come in at 5am and she’s waiting for me*

*She said where have you been, I said I was out*

*She said you’re no good cause you’re running without love*

*Cause I'm going straight to hell  
Just like my momma said . . .*

Every time the door opened, Nancy looked up. By the time Luke came through it, she had finished her third double and was leaning over the bar with her knees in the barstool, ass in the air, and her elbows on the wet bar hollering down to the other end to Ray.

“Nancy, hush! I’ll be there in a second. Can’t you see I’m helping somebody?”

“Quit being so pissy, Ray. I just asking for another drink.”

“Well, hold on! There’re other people in this place besides you.”

“Owww!” Nancy flinched and turned around almost falling off the stool. “Luke, damn you!”

“Girl, you got them good jeans on again with your ass all in the air. You spect me not to smack it?” Luke said.

“That fucking hurt.”

“Aww, you poor thing. I didn’t even smack it that hard. Quit being a baby. I definitely smacked it harder before and you didn’t complain then.”

“I don’t care, it still hurt. And that’s completely different.”

“Luke.” Ray nodded. “Here’s your drink, Nancy. It’s only a single. You can slow down for a minute.”

“Unh, Ray,” she whined.

“A single or nothing.”

Nancy took the drink and climbed down off the barstool. She walked away from Luke acting like she was mad at him. She walked back over to the table, tripped where the carpet meets linoleum, and a little bit of her drink sloshed out and onto to her shirt. “Dammit!” she said under her breath. “Why I wear black.”

Nancy picked up her pack of cigarettes and lit another one. She put three more quarters into the table. The balls rolled out along the plastic window again down to the other end of the table. She pulled all the balls out placing them on the table inside the triangle all in order just as she had done before. She had the table all set up and looked around, wanting Luke to come play, but she just wanted anyone's attention.

"Who wants to get beat in a game?" She held her cue stick and her cigarette in the same hand and her drink in the other. "Come on. Y'all all scared! Who wants to play me?" Several of the regulars looked up at her, but no one got up to play. They all knew who was going to.

"She talking to you, ain't she, Luke?" Ray said. "You need to quit that. She been trouble since she was fifteen, and she'll lay claim to everything you got."

"It ain't even like that, Ray. We just playing around when we up here drinking. Besides I ain't no sucker like Clint."

"Don't look like it to me, Luke. And don't go trying to badmouth Clint in my bar."

"What would you do if she was throwing it at you?"

"Luke! Ain't you gonna come play with me?" Nancy hollered from across the bar, slightly slurring and tapping her foot and the end of her cue on the ground.

~ *Old Plot, New Story* ~

Clint's legs were stretched out with his feet up on the porch railing. He was pushing off of it to keep his chair rocking. He would stop every now and again and just lean back. Jackson had gotten up from beside the chair and was now lying under Clint's legs with his back pressed up against the balusters.

Clint had spent countless hours out in the shop behind the house turning those balusters. For a whole winter, he had worked on them when he got home from work. About every seventh baluster in the porch railing, Clint had patiently spun and shaped with a lathe chisel adding just the right amount of detail. There was no way he would have been able to carve enough decorative ones to do the whole railing around the porch and deck. That would have been too much detail, anyway. Nancy would have loved it. Instead, he had carved enough of them to add just the right amount. He had spun every one out back in the shop while Nancy was out running around late into the night.

Clint reached into the cooler and moved his hand around in the ice searching for another bottle of Bud. The cooler was empty. "Damn, we drank 'em all. Guess it's time to go in and refill the cooler, boy." When he got up, it startled Jackson. The dog jumped up and barked like he could protect Clint from his own mistakes. "Easy, boy. It's just me. You finally catch that rabbit you were chasing?"

Jackson stretched his front legs forward and out. He pushed his chest towards the ground, then stood up straight and shook himself out from his evening nap. "Come on, boy. Let's go get some beer," Clint said. Jackson trotted to the French door and Clint followed behind him with the cooler and opened it. On the way to the kitchen, Clint stopped and looked up, admiring all

the work he had done. He was really making this place into something. Aunt Lissy and Pa would have been proud—probably not of how he was paying for it though.

He opened the fridge. No more beer except Nancy's big one. He emptied it into the sink. "Guess we're going out to the shop to check the fridge out there," he told Jackson.

There was no checking about it. Clint knew the fridge in the shop had a case in it. He kept the shop locked, not just because of the tools that were in there and to keep Nancy out of the beer, but because he was growing his whole livelihood in there. In his indoor garden, he had seventy-five of the highest yielding female pot plants he had ever grown. Those ladies, not Nancy, were his future—his one backup plan. He was good at growing and he'd been doing it for years. Clint produced some of the best pot to come out of Chatham County, and only a few people knew he was the one growing it. Like he could remodel Aunt Lissy's on the wages of a mechanic? The death of his father had allowed him to expand his operation since Pa had left him the family's second farm. The rumor that he had received a large family inheritance when his dad died let him start work on Aunt Lissy's place without people wondering where he was getting his money. He would have traded all of it to have Pa back though. He would have given it all up.

Clint stood by the kitchen door to the back porch. "Come on, boy. How about a walk down to the pond too?" he said.

Jackson new those words and his ears perked up. He ran to the sliding glass door that went out to the back porch. Clint slid it open and Jackson ran out into the yard between the house and the shop. Clint walked slowly to the shop. He looked up at the stars in summer sky. The constellations were all there: the Big Dipper was hanging brightly a little northwest of the house, Arcturus was directly overhead, and Spica was shining the brightest in Virgo due south of the



house. Sirius was still shining bright too, even though the Fourth of July had already passed.

Clint had read in one of his books that Sirius was the “Spiritual Sun” and was associated with liberation and freedom. He thought about this as he gazed up at the summer sky. He thought about how Nancy never even picked up a book. Clint had added an entire library on to the house the fall before he had begun spinning the balusters all winter for the deck. He filled it with most of his father’s books and added a lot of his own as well, but Nancy only looked at those gossip magazines you’d get in the check-out aisle. It didn’t matter though. Looking up at the clear summer sky, Clint began to feel that liberation, that freedom; the “Spiritual Sun” was shining on him.

Clint reached into his pocket and pulled out the keys to the shop. No one had a key except him, and Nancy would never have one. He jingled them before he put them in the lock and Jackson ran around from the backside of the shop where he was trying to stir up the peacocks. Over the fans from the grow room, Clint heard the birds let out their calls from atop the trees on the other side of the shop just as expected.

“The alarm’s working at least,” Clint said out loud, talking about the peacocks. He pushed the door open and flipped the light switch up. The fluorescent bulb flickered as it came on. Jackson and Clint walked across the shop and found the case in the fridge. Clint grabbed a beer and immediately popped the top and put three more in a plastic bag.

“Ready, boy? Come on.” With his shirt still unbuttoned, Clint left the shop with his dog, locked up and headed down to the pond. The frogs were croaking louder than usual and the crickets seemed to be louder too. Jackson ran ahead down the worn path to the pond. He was getting out of the water when Clint got there. Jackson rummaged around for a stick and brought it to Clint. Clint threw it into the water. The moon was shining brightly off the pond and

flickering on the ripples. Jackson could hear where the stick had landed, but with the moon so bright, he could see it just as well. Jackson retrieved the stick and brought it back to Clint and he threw it again. Over and over again, he threw the stick out and Jackson brought it back to him. Clint began to think how Nancy did the same thing in a way . . . always running off and then coming back to him, but Clint knew where Jackson was going and he came faithfully back just to retrieve the stick for Clint again. It was as much for Clint as it was for Jackson. Nancy just did everything to suit herself; she didn't care that Clint stood waiting.

When Jackson tired out, he lay down beside Clint and chewed on the wet stick. For some reason, the frogs and crickets silenced, they were drowned out as the water stilled from Jackson's fetching. Maybe Clint's thoughts were just taking over.

"Damn, Jackson. Do I really love that girl? Putting up with all her bullshit all the time is just downright stupid. After all these years she's still doing the same damn thing and I wait around to clean up the mess. I don't care if she knows about the shop, anymore. I love her and all but, just—damn! I'm so sick of her drunken bullshit. White trash. That's all she is—white trash. Piece of white trash—that all she is. Ain't that right, boy?" Jackson quit gnawing for a minute and looked up at Clint. "You've been trying to tell me all along anyway. Haven't ya?"

"Nancy ain't nothing to get upset about," he told Jackson while trying to convince himself. He escaped to Johnny Cash and started mumbling song words:

*Now I taught the weeping willow how to cry.*

*And I showed the clouds how to cover up a clear blue sky.*

"No, that ain't the one.

*Everybody knows where you go when the sun goes down.*

*I think you only live to see the lights of town.*

Come on, Jackson. Let's head back up to the house."

~ *Birdmouth* ~

“Ray, can I get another round and a shot of bourbon?” Luke asked. Ray gave him another beer and his shot. He poured Nancy a light single.

“Don’t you think she’s had enough?”

“You know how light your hand’s been this round and last.”

“I’ll only charge you for one of them then, but she’s done after this.”

Nancy and Luke had been playing pool for a while and flirting over by the jukebox. Every time Luke went to the bar to get another beer and Nancy a drink, he got a cold shoulder, not only from Ray, but from the rest of the boys sitting at the bar too. The two of them were drunk and Nancy kept picking the worst songs on the jukebox. The rest of the patrons were getting annoyed. “Damn, Ray. If she plays that song one more time I swear.”

Luke handed Nancy her drink on the opposite side of the room. “You’re cut off after this one.”

“Who says? No I ain’t.” Nancy took the drink from Luke and stormed over to the bar.

“Ray, why the hell you cut me off? I ain’t that drunk!”

“Looking out for you, darling. Think you had more than enough.”

“What the fuck, Ray?”

“Nancy—exactly my point.”

“Well, fuck you then.” She turned and stormed off back towards the pool table and Luke. She tripped over the same spot in the floor again, but didn’t fall.

“Guess Ray was right. Look, you falling all over the place.”

“You’re just as much an asshole as he is.” She put another dollar in the jukebox and played Shania Twain’s “Man! I Feel Like a Woman” and spun around with her pool cue like it

was a microphone. All the guys at the bar looked up at Ray. Ray turned the master volume down.

“What the fuck? Why he gonna turn it down? I just paid to hear that,” Nancy complained to Luke.

“It’s all right. We done heard it enough.”

“I don’t give a shit. I paid for it.” Nancy stormed over to the bar. “Ray! What the fuck? Why you turn it down?”

“You played it enough. Everyone else is sick of hearing it.”

“I paid for the damn song, Ray. You owe me a drink then.”

“Not tonight, Nancy. I told Luke that you’re cut off. If you don’t like it, both of you can leave.”

“Fuck you, Ray! I just want to hear my damn song!”

Luke heard them getting loud. “What’s going on? Ray, she just wants to hear her song one more time and then she’ll go.”

“I’m not turning it back up. Everyone’s heard it enough and it’s about time she go home anyway. She’s had enough.”

“You telling her to leave?”

“I’m telling you that you both can leave.”

“I haven’t done nothing, Ray, but I see how things are.”

“Well, y’all have a good night then. I’ll see you next time, but y’all are done for tonight.”

“Come on, Nancy. Time for you to go home.”

“I ain’t leaving until I hear my song, get another drink, or get my dollar back,” she insisted looking straight at Ray.

“Get on out of here, Nancy. Quit causing trouble. The only reason we all put up with you anyway is ’cause of Clint.”

“Fuck you! Screw Clint and t’hell with this whole damn shit-hole-of-a-bar!!”

“Luke, get her out of here. I’m not dealing with this shit tonight. She’s got a fire under her for some reason. Not dealing with Nancy’s crazy ass tonight.”

“Call me fucking crazy? Say it to me, not to Luke, you prick!” Ray came out from around the bar.

“Nancy, come on. I’ll take you home.” Luke took her hand and tried to pull her towards the door.

“I don’t need you to take me home, Luke,” and she shook her hand free. “I can drive my-own-fucking-self. So sick of all y’all trying take care of me like I’m a kid. Fuck all y’all!” Nancy stormed out the door and ran to her car. She burst into tears trying to get the car door open. Luke followed after her.

“Nancy.”

She didn’t respond; she was still trying to get her door open. “Dammit! Piece of shit!” and she slammed her fist on the roof of the car.

“Nancy, calm down. I’ll drive you.”

“I don’t need you to drive me, dammit!” She tried again at the door. This time she got it unlocked and flung the door open. She got into the driver’s seat, turned the car on, rolled the window down and lit a cigarette. “Move, Luke!” She was trying to pull the door shut. Luke got out of the way. When he moved, she slammed the door and let out a loud sob. She slammed her hands against the steering wheel several times while yelling, “Dammit! Fuck! Dammit!”

“Nancy, calm down. You shouldn’t drive. Let me take you home.”

“Don’t tell me what I should or shouldn’t do, Luke. Screw you!”

“Nancy—”

She pulled the shifter down to R and slammed her foot on the gas. Gravel kicked up as she backed out and then slammed on brakes. She flung the car into drive and sped out onto the road, not stopping to look. She was heading east down the highway crying. She lit another cigarette off the one she was still smoking.

She made it the six miles down the road to Bobby’s. Luke was right. She pulled into the driveway too fast and the backend of the car slid out to the left, but she corrected it. She came to a halting stop. She took the Sunburst out of her bag and reapplied it to her lips, slipped it into her back pocket and got out. She went to Bobby’s back door.

“Bobby, open the door! It’s Nancy,” she hollered through the thin door of the trailer, banging on it like a cop.

Bobby got up, pissed off. “What the hell you doing, Nancy? Driving in here like that and then banging on the door like a fucking cop? I told you, you can’t be doing shit like this.” Nancy slid by Bobby and flung herself onto the sofa.

“Tonight’s been so fucked up, Bobby.”

“Looks like it. Now, what the hell you doing over here?”

“I was just trying to get a bag before I go home.”

“Don’t look like you need a bag to me. Come on. Get up. I’ll take you out to Clint’s.”

“Really? You ain’t gonna sell me a damn bag, Bobby?”

“Nah, Nancy. You don’t need to be coming around here like this. Driving all fucking crazy—yelling through the door this time of night— or any time. You driving around all drunk

and shit. What the hell you doing? You're going to get arrested and I'm not dealing with that shit—not coming from this spot you ain't. Come on. I'll take you home. Get up.”

“You know what? Fuck you, Bobby! Fuck Luke, fuck Clint, fuck Ray, fuck all of you!”  
She snatched her bag up off the floor and stormed out of the trailer. She got back in the car and pulled out the same way she had pulled in.



~ *Jitterbug* ~

Alyssa threw her apron on top of the bar by the cash register and took the only barstool left. Mike looked at her and she nodded. “Yes, please. What a shift.” It was after one a.m.

“You made some money though, right?” he asked as he poured her drink.

“Yeah, good money, but damn! My hands were shaking so badly at the end of the rush I could barely fill anyone’s water glass—I fucking swear.” Alyssa let out a “huh” of air and continued, “If you hadn’t left me that shot in the kitchen and that line, I probably would have just fallen out right there.”

Mike put her drink in front of her on the bar. “Hey,” he shrugged his shoulders and said, “I do what I can. What are you getting into tonight?”

“I dunno, but I’m going to sit here and drink this drink and then figure it out. I should just go home—we’ve partied our asses off this week and it’s just now Thursday. Hell, I don’t know if I’ll make it to the weekend.”

“I hear ya. Well, I’m gonna sit around and have a few while I clean up and then there’s some after party at Josh and Miranda’s or something. You want to hang out for a while and then go over there?”

“I might.” Alyssa cringed as she took her first sip of her vodka and tonic and got goose bumps. “Wooooh—we’ll see after I finish this. Nice pour, Mike.”

“No worries, looked like you could use it. You worked your butt off tonight.”

“Gotta make that money.” She rubbed her thumb together with her pointer finger.

“I know that’s right.”

“Hey, Mike, you still got that bag?”

“Yeah, but there’s not much in it. You can finish it if you go pick up some more.”

“That’s fine. Let me get it and I’ll go when I finish this drink.” Mike walked around to the opening at the edge of the bar and cautiously took the bag from his pocket and slipped it to Alyssa. “Got it. Thanks, man.”

Alyssa went to the bathroom and locked herself in the stall furthest away from the door. She took her keys out of her purse and untied the bag. There wasn’t much left— it was hers to finish anyway. Alyssa finished it off in three huge key-bumps and then put the bag in her mouth and sucked the remaining powder off of it. She spit it out into a bit of toilet paper and wrapped it up, threw it in the bowl and flushed it. She wiped her nose and unlocked the door. At the sink, she washed her hands and did a double check on her nostrils. She fixed her hair and freshened up her makeup—patting on some Cover Girl powder and putting some lightly rose-tinted lip-gloss on. It came out clear, but it did bring out the natural pink in her lips. Gathered, she left the restroom and went back to the bar.

“Thanks,” she told Mike, and she sat at the bar finishing her drink while having a quick conversation with one of the regulars, Sam. She interrupted him after her last sip. “I have to run down the road real quick,” she said, putting her empty glass on the bar. “But I’ll be back before last call. Get a table, and I’ll shoot a couple games when I get back if you want.”

“Yeah sure, if I’m still here. Be careful.”

“I will,” Alyssa said, as she gathered her things and went out the door. The hot summer air that had been baking in her car all day escaped when she opened the door. She rolled her window down with the door still open and lit a cigarette. Before pulling out to make the short six-mile run out to Bobby’s, Alyssa recounted the tips she had made. Thursday night was usually a good dinner shift to have and tonight had been no exception. Alyssa counted \$264, the majority in 20s. She put five of them in the center console and locked it before backing out and getting on

the road to Bobby's. She slowed down as she approached his driveway and put her signal on. Headlights were coming up the drive towards the road way too fast. An older white Mustang came flying out of the driveway and onto the road, not even slowing down before it made the turn. Alyssa pulled in and parked her car.

The steps wobbled to the back door of the trailer. She knocked lightly on the door.

"Who is it?"

"It's Lyssa, Bobby." The knob turned and he opened the door. "Who the hell was that pulling out so fast? Didn't even stop at the road."

"Some dumb drunk bitch acting crazy—crazier than you," he smiled.

"Shut up."

"You just get off work?"

"Yeah. I was trying to grab a bag real quick and take it to my boy before last call."

"How much you want?"

"I dunno . . . a ball, I guess. I'll just break his outta that."

"Aight." Bobby went to the counter in the kitchen and weighed out the blow she wanted. Alyssa sat down on the sofa.

"We're going to be up there drinking for a while if you want to come have one. Crown, on me."

"Nah, I'm trying to stay in tonight. Damn Devon was supposed to be out here over an hour ago. He's s'posed to sling this dope tonight so I can actually get some sleep. Don't know where the hell he at—I'm trying to get home. You'll have fun though. Don't get too wild and start acting like that twinkie that just drove outta here" Bobby winked at her.

“Funny, Bobby,” Alyssa said, as she shifted her weight on the sofa. She searched underneath her thigh. “What the hell am I sitting on?” she said to herself. She pulled a tube of lipstick out from underneath her. She took the cap off and twisted the stick up. “Now, Bobby, this is a great color for you. Who the hell would wear this?” She rolled the stick back down and put the cap on it. She turned it over to read the label. “Sunburst? It definitely is.” She tossed it onto the coffee table. “Hey, Bobby.”

“Huh?”

Alyssa got up and walked over to the counter. “There’s supposed to be some really good herb in a couple days.”

“Yeah, there should be. That reminds me, I need to call my boy.”

“I wonder if it’s the same stuff.”

“I don’t know, but we’ll find out.”

“Man, wish we still had that herb Duncan and I used to grow.”

“Hell yeah, that was some good shit. That’s yours,” Bobby said pointing to the pile of coke on the plate. He went to the living room and picked his cell up off the table. He looked for a number on it, pressed send, and sat down on the sofa. Bobby waited while it rang. He watched Alyssa cut out a line and do it before splitting the bags up.

“Lyssa, you gotta stop—” Bobby was interrupted. “Clint, it’s Bobby,” he said and then paused. “I’m good—just the usual shit. But hey, I was calling to let you know . . .”

Alyssa was at the door. She had finished splitting Mike’s bag out of hers and said softly, “Bobby, I’m gone. Money’s on the counter. I’ll call you later.” He nodded at her and Alyssa went out the door to head back to the bar to give Mike his bag.

~ *Frame Details* ~

Alyssa and Mike stayed at the bar drinking and blowing lines well after closing time. After a while, when everything was cleaned up and the money was counted, the pair locked up and headed to Josh and Miranda's. It was late. When they got to the party, they saw the usual characters left hanging around listening to the same music, drinking the same beer, passing around the same plate, all sharing the same straw.

Alyssa turned to Mike, "I think I'm actually going to go home. Just not really feeling it and there's nothing really going on."

"I hear ya. I'll see you tomorrow at work."

"For sure."

Alyssa left Josh and Miranda's and walked back to work where her car was. The booze was wearing off or maybe the cocaine was sobering her up, it didn't matter which, the night was coming to an end. The sun would be up soon. Alyssa wished she had just gone home after her shift ended, but she hadn't. She got in her car and pulled out of the parking lot. She turned the stereo on and headed west with the windows down, singing along to the song that was on:

*Didn't get to sleep last night till the morning came around.*

*Set out runnin' but I take my time*

*A friend of the devil is a friend of mine*

*If I get home before daylight, I just might get some sleep tonight . . .*

The sun was about to break behind her. Alyssa hated going home this late—or his early. Her throat got tight, but she didn't start to cry. She drove past her turnoff and started heading back out to Bobby's spot. If he wasn't around, Devon would be out there.

She turned left into the driveway and went around to the back door again. The door was unlocked. She tripped on the way in.

“Fucked up, are ya?”

“Oh shit, you’re still here. D didn’t come?”

“Nah, mother fucker didn’t call or nothing.”

“That sucks. Hope nothing happened to him.”

“You know nothing happened to him. He probably went out with some chicken-head, got drunk and took her home.”

“Well, let me get a little bag.”

“You been out here three times today, girl. Don’t you think you should be done for the night?”

“Not at this point. What’s the difference?”

“Nah, Lyssa. You don’t need no more. You’re getting carried away. I’m cutting you off from out here.”

“Let me just get a 20, Bobby. For real, what the fuck?”

“For real, nah. Alyssa you cut off. I love you, girl, but hell no. I’m not giving you anymore shit. It’s gonna grab you, girl. Quit that shit now or it’s not ever gonna let go.” Bobby never dabbled with the powder himself, he just sold it—soft or solid. He knew what it did to people though. He’d seen it happen—lots of times. Crack addicts would come out there and trade him the tires right off their own car, and then walk home. Devon would say that they “smoked the tires straight off their car.” They’d take the last of their food stamps and go buy expensive steaks from the grocery store and trade those too. How Bobby could do that, Alyssa didn’t understand, but it was business and cocaine was Bobby’s business.

Bobby controlled the blow and set the market in three counties. He ran part of Virginia too. Cutting Alyssa off wouldn’t hurt his pocket; that’s not what it was about anyway. Alyssa

could just go get it from somewhere else if she really wanted it or send someone else to go get a bag from him. Alyssa had known Bobby her whole life. They had cookouts together, went to clubs and out to dinner, they celebrated holidays with one another and each other's families. Bobby cared about her too much to see her lose it all. If she didn't watch out it was going to take her over and Bobby didn't want to see Alyssa's habit consume her. It wasn't too late.

Alyssa recognized that when Bobby told her that she was cutoff, it was time for her to quit or at least dry out for a bit. She saw the difference in his familiar eyes when he spoke. She felt it in his stern I-don't-give-a-fuck-I'm-boss-yes-we're-friends-I've-known-you-forever-so-fucking-listen-to-me-because-I'm-telling-you-now-and-never-again-I-told-you-when-it-came-to-this-point-I-would-so-don't-be-a-dumb-bitch-listen-to-me-I-love-you tone. Alyssa understood, but nevertheless, she took a plate from the drying rack in the sink, poured the last of her bag out onto it and cut it into two giant rails. She rolled up a twenty-dollar bill and snorted each one into her right nostril, pausing briefly between the two. Her eyes got big. Her face was numb. She loved Bobbie's coke—it got her high, not jacked. It was that un-cut, that pure, that good.

Alyssa unrolled the twenty and slapped it down on the kitchen counter of the trailer. “Twenty bucks! I'm done with this shit.”

“I'm keeping it. Last twenty you couldn't spend—and don't be coming up here tomorrow whining about your twenty bucks.”

“The fuck I will,” Alyssa told him, fueled with her last lines of cocaine.

“I'm serious,” he said. “You'll get it back when I know you're not trying to get powder with it.”

Alyssa found a marker on the counter and wrote: THANK YOU and the date on it.

Bobbie wrote: YOU'RE NOT WELCOME YET!! and went over the "not" and the "yet" several times so they looked bold. He initialed the date.

The two of them sat around for a little while longer before Alyssa decided to go. On her way home she chain-smoked two cigarettes. She was taking her time driving out to her parent's house and listening to Johnny Cash. She sang along:

*You've been flying so high you don't know  
That you're blind to the writin' on the wall  
But some day you'll look down  
And you'll find you've got no place to fall  
When the bright lights're gone you'll be standing alone  
Forsaken in the naked light of day  
Then you'll know that it's all over but the dying  
And you've still got the devil to pay . . .*



~ *The Site Study* ~

Alyssa turned into the driveway. It was right at seven a.m.. She had tried to wait long enough to make it seem like she had actually been to sleep last night or at least like she wasn't up partying all night—not just last night, but for the past three days. Despite her irresponsible habits, she always made it to work. Alyssa never missed a shift and always tried to pick one up on the days she wasn't scheduled. She was good at her job; the customers loved her. She made good money and had put most of it in the bank to save for when she got back to school next semester.

When Alyssa climbed the steps to the side door in the day's new sunshine, she felt different for some reason. Maybe it was what Bobby had said to her and the promise she had made him. Maybe she was just tired, but one of her usual stories of “I fell asleep at so-and-so's and just woke up and came home . . . I was drinking last night and didn't want to drive, so I just crashed at . . .” or any other excuse for why she looked like hell, still in her work clothes, coming home when her mother was about to get dressed and go to work, wasn't going to come out of her mouth. Alyssa just couldn't do it this time. Something had to change—maybe something already had. She was tired of lying—tired of her habit. She wasn't fooling anyone, especially not her mother, whom she hadn't seen in three days and who knew her better than Alyssa knew herself.

When Alyssa opened the side door, she saw the back of her mom's head; she was sitting on the sofa. She had her gray roots touched up since Alyssa had seen her last. The back of the sofa was perpendicular to the hallway leading from the side door into the house. Butch, the yellow lab, lay there asleep with a worn bandana tied around his neck. Alyssa closed the glass door and walked down the hallway. She stopped at the back of the sofa.

The bright morning sun came through the window over the kitchen sink. The smell of the coffee her mother had brewed filled the kitchen and the den. Alyssa knew that her father would soon smell it too. He would come out of the master bedroom on the far side of the grand room dressed only in an old pair of jeans. He would walk to the kitchen in his bare feet and fry an egg on the gas stove in his mother's old iron skillet. He might drink a beer in three quick gulps while Pam was in the laundry room ironing him a shirt to put on. He would crush the can, bending it in the middle and hide it in the trashcan underneath whatever was on top. Alyssa knew the routine.

She stood at the back of the sofa behind her mother. She touched her mom's newly dyed hair with a shaking hand and withdrew it quickly. Alyssa leaned over and rested her cheek on her mom's head. The smell of her shampoo and hairspray were always the same. Tears began to well up in her eyes; she felt her throat begin to lock. It grew tight and sore. Alyssa went around the sofa, burst into tears and collapsed at her mother's feet. She looked up at her mom while she held onto her mother's legs and saw the aging she had caused. Her mom looked as tired as she did.

Pam looked down at her and put her hand on Alyssa's head, but no comforting or understanding words came out of her mouth. They both knew it was time. They had been going around and around with Alyssa and her habit for the last six years. Alyssa had tried on her own, but she couldn't do it. She had failed over and over again.

"Come on, get up," Pam said as she stood up from the sofa. Alyssa started bawling and buried her face into the empty spot where her mom had sat.

"Mom, what's wrong with me?" Alyssa sobbed.

"Enough. Now get up. You need to go pack a bag. Get comfortable clothes and some books or whatever you want to take. It's time, Alyssa. You're going today."

"I want to," Alyssa told her mom as she started for the stairs. "I've wanted to!"

“Leave your purse here.”

“Really? I don’t have anything.”

“Then leave it here.”

“I did it all, Mom!”

“I said leave it.”

Halfway to the stairs, Alyssa let go of her bag. Her purse dropped to the floor. She felt herself beginning to let go of the addiction that held hold of her—or at least trying to. She wanted to be done with it and not just with the last bag she had finished before she got home but done with it for good.

Pam watched her daughter trudge up the stairs to her bedroom. She didn’t understand how she had let Alyssa get to this point. She had tried to help her before, but nothing had worked. She watched her daughter with a blank almost-frown that showed her disappointment, her concern, and her exhaustion. Alyssa looked back and saw the pain, worry, and torment she had caused. Each wrinkle, the bags under her eyes, the frown lines were all Alyssa’s fault.

Alyssa shut the door to her room, leaned her back against it and slid to the floor with her head in her hands. “What the hell am I doing?” she said to herself. “Am I really about to check-in to detox?” Alyssa’s tears stopped; they turned to anger and then out they came again. She couldn’t get the look on her mother’s face out of her mind. If Pam had only known all of what Alyssa had been through. If she had really known what all had happened last spring semester at school and all the wrong decisions that combined to make Alyssa have to drop out, it might have killed her.

~ *Deadwood* ~

Clint heard the phone ringing when he and Jackson got to the door on the back porch.

“Who’s calling this late, boy? What did Nancy do now?” Clint slid the door open and went to the phone. “Hello,” he answered.

“Clint, it’s Bobby.”

“How ya doing, man?”

“I’m good—just the usual shit. But hey, I was just calling to let you know Nancy been over here drunk as hell a few minutes ago, hollering and crying, driving like a maniac. I told her I’d carry her home, out to you, and she got mad and stormed out of here. Pulled out being all crazy and shit. Just wanted you to know. Don’t know if she’s headed your way or not, but she don’t need to be driving like she is—drunk and crying and being all crazy and shit.”

“Dammit. Thanks, Bobby. Sorry if she caused any trouble over at your place. You know how she is. Damn, you’ve known her as long as I have.”

“It’s straight. I just figured I’d give you a call so someone knew where she was or at least where she was last. She’s probably between my place and yours. She’s real drunk, warning you, man. Just letting you know in case she don’t get home soon. She’s got to quit drinking like she does, Clint. I’m surprised she hasn’t killed herself yet.”

“I know, Bobby, I know. I’ve about given up on her. Thanks, man, I appreciate it. And I’ll be by the next couple of days. This batch of smoke is almost done drying. Everything’s looking real pretty.”

“Hell yeah, man. That wasn’t why I called though, but we square on last time, right?”

“Yeah, we’re square.”

“Sounds good. Hope Nancy gets on home.”

“Thanks for the call, Bobby. I’ll see you in a few days.”

“Aight.”

Clint hung the phone up. “Fucking Nancy. Like she don’t know I know what goes on in this town,” Clint said, looking down at his dog. He took a seat at the kitchen table and rolled another spliff. After he finished, he said, “This ought to do us for the night. Come on, Jackson. Let’s go sit on the porch and wait on Nancy.”

He hit play on the stereo again when he passed through the living room. Clint carried the cordless phone with him back out to the front porch and popped open his last beer for the night. He lit the spliff as he walked over to the railing and he leaned out over it. He looked up at the moon in the night sky, “There’s nothing like these southern skies, Jackson. Nothing like ’em.”

Clint sat down in his rocking chair and put his feet back up on the railing. He finished most of his beer and smoked half of the spliff, then put it out and set it next to phone on the table. Clint leaned his head against the back of the rocking chair and closed his eyes. He took a deep breath and let it out long and slow. Johnny Cash was singing low in the background. He wasn’t mad, not really even worried, just tired of Nancy’s drama. It was the same old shit all the time.

The phone woke Clint up about an hour or so later. He shook his head and opened his eyes as he reached for the phone. Somewhat startled, he said, “Hello?” Sobs poured out from the other end of the phone.

“Clint—Clint,” Nancy cried.

“Nancy, that you? What’s wrong? Where are you?” Clint sat up in the rocking chair.

“You gotta come get me.”

“Where are you?”

“Hillsborough at the Orange County jail.”

“What the hell happened, Nancy?”

“Just come get me, Clint,” she sobbed, “or they gonna make me dress-out, and then you can’t get me till who knows when tomorrow.”

Clint sat with his elbows on his thighs, his left hand holding his head and his right holding the phone to his ear, “What the fuck did you do, Nancy? Bobby called, said you were over there raising hell, drunk as all hell—”

“Clint, just come get me.”

“Not till you tell me what happened.”

“I spun off the road trying not to hit a deer on my way home. The car’s still in the ditch. It ain’t messed up though.”

“Who picked you up?”

“I was in the ditch trying to get the car out and Burch came by and got me.”

“Dammit, Nancy! I can’t fix this one—it’s your fourth. When the hell are you going learn?”

“Not now, Clint. Just come get me. Please, I’m begging you. Just come get me,” she continued to sob. “Please, Clint—just come get me, please. I ain’t even that drunk.”

“Shut your mouth and do what they tell you. Don’t start any bullshit, Nancy. How much is your bond?”

“Thirty-five-hundred.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Unh-unh,” she whined.

“What the hell really happened?”

“Nothing. I told you. It’s just that high ’cause of my other ones.”

“Nancy, this shit is going to stop. I’m coming to get you, but tomorrow we’re gonna sit down and figure some of this shit out. You gotta quit drinking or you’re going to end up in jail for longer than a couple of hours—if you don’t kill yourself first.”

“I know, Clint, I know. Just come get me, please.”

“I’m being serious. You’re gonna get some help tomorrow. You’re going into a program or something or I’m not gonna to pay your bond.”

“Just please, please come get me.”

“I’ll leave in a minute.” Clint hung the phone up and put it back on the table. He stood up and buttoned his shirt, “Come on, Jackson. We’re going for a ride.”

~ *Getting out of the Ground* ~

Alyssa sat on the floor in her bedroom with her head in her hands and thought about the recent months and the past year. She thought about the last spring semester at school when she took her psych-withdrawal and dropped out. She was living with Duncan who she had known since she was a teenager. He had grown up in the next town over. They had worked at the same hole-in-the-wall pizza shop together. They ran with the same crowd. Last year they lived together blowing glass, growing pot, slinging blow, and following whatever spark of creativity struck them at whatever moment. Drug induced or not.

Alyssa thought about how she had stopped going to class because she was either too hungover or still up from the night before. She and Duncan were equally bad influences on each other. The relationship had quickly failed after several arrests, a short-lived idea of getting married, one tie-dyed kitchen, a totaled car, and \$4000 worth of hand-blown glass that was smashed in it. She, Duncan, and Phil were packing the inventory up and dividing it into cases to be sold at a music festival in Florida. There, a number of friends would spread out and work, each keeping a bit of the profit off the top from the glass that was sold. The glass was not the only thing that shattered that spring.

They planned the trip, and far in advance, but planned it poorly. Neither Duncan nor Alyssa had been to Key West before. If they left and drove straight through, they could shoot down to the Keys, have some fun and then head back up to Ft. Lauderdale with plenty of time left to meet up with Phil. All three of them would get to the festival at the perfect time the next day to work the lot.

They left at three a.m., three days after Alyssa's twenty-first birthday from the small college town they lived in half drunk, with 125 grams of cocaine and numerous other drugs in



the car to travel over a 1000 miles to hear some music. It made perfect, illogical cokehead-sense. They headed south down I-95 to Key West on no sleep and empty stomachs, chain smoking cigarettes, drinking Pepsi, and carrying the Big 8 of cocaine that Bobby had fronted Alyssa. Without the inventory of glass, she, Duncan and Phil had to pay for the trip somehow and make some money while they were on the road. 100 grams of the Big 8 were stashed in the trunk, this left Alyssa and Duncan with 25 to keep up front as they traveled down one of the most drug trafficked interstate routes in America.

Alyssa remembered most of the trip like it just happened. She and Duncan drove the nineteen hours to spend maybe three in Key West getting drunk before they got back in the car to head up to Ft. Lauderdale. That was when Alyssa gave up on driving and Duncan took over. Alyssa got settled in the passenger's seat, leaned over the gearshift and gave Duncan a huge kiss.

"I'm so excited!" she said. "Jumpstart back to Ft. Lauderdale?" she asked as she reached into the door pocket and got the stash out.

"Hell, yeah. Line it up."

Alyssa railed out two huge lines on a CD case and she and Duncan blew them both. They got back on US-1 and headed north back through the keys listening to Ben Harper. Alyssa played Duncan's jimmy to the beat in the seat beside him and sang along:

*I have faith in a few things  
divinity and grace  
but even when I'm on my knees  
I know the devil prays . . . .*

Not long up the road, Alyssa was rolling up the windows and cutting out more lines. Now that she was chopping the powder out, she could do how much she wanted. She made the lines

the size she craved. The correct thickness and length to give her the high she desired. She knew nothing of moderation.

Duncan kept driving. They passed back through the Coke Capitol. Ft. Lauderdale wasn't far away, after Miami. Alyssa sat quietly in the seat next to Duncan with her feet on the dashboard. The sun was almost completely set and Alyssa felt a bit chilled; she was getting clammy. She reached over to the backseat to get her favorite brown hoodie and pulled it to herself like a blanket. She noticed that the bag of 25 was disappearing as she untied it to cut out another set of lines. She made four moderate ones this time. Her idea of moderation kicked in when she saw the noticeable difference in the bag she held. She took one of hers and held the CD case up for Duncan. He leaned over, holding the wheel steady with only one hand and sniffed both of his quickly. "Good," he said lifting his head in a nod.

Alyssa brought the CD case back down to her lap. She took her other line and kind of coughed. "Ugh! That fucking drip," and she gagged a bit.

Alyssa wiped the CD case off and put it back in the pocket to the door where the now not-so-giant bag of blow was. She leaned her head back against the seat. She felt kind of cold again and started to put her hoodie on, but stopped before she pulled it over. She quickly took her arms out of the sweatshirt; she was suddenly really hot and began to sweat. She could feel her heart beating too fast. The inside of her was racing. It felt good for a moment, but then switched back to too slow and her breath got shallow. She couldn't catch it. She felt her eyes surge upward and back, and then down to normal again. It was like her whole body was choking. She was making tight, quick, and tense jerks. She felt it in the center of her body—her core. She just wanted one good breath.

Duncan wasn't paying attention. The music was up and he was hammering out the drumbeat with his palms against the steering wheel and singing. Alyssa managed to swat at him with her left arm, her hand barely made contact with him. "Dun—," was all she managed to get out before everything went white.

Duncan didn't know what was going on at first. He thought Alyssa was just trying to tell him something he didn't care enough about to turn the song down to hear. Luckily, he looked over at her anyway. She was gagging and puking a white drool. "Alyssa? Alyssa?" he had shouted, but there was no response. He managed to get the car off the highway and put it in park. Duncan jumped out and ran around to the other side to get to Alyssa. She had pushed herself against the door so when he opened it she fell halfway out of the car. He thought he knew what to do.

Alyssa sort of remembered coming back to. Duncan was cramming Valium in her mouth trying to get her to swallow. The little blue benzos needed to make it down. Duncan took the partially dissolved pieces and shoved them under Alyssa's tongue. He held it down for her and then closed her mouth shut to make sure they didn't come back out while he held her head up. It took a while to get Alyssa to sit back upright in her seat. She had spit up down the front of her shirt and all in her lap.

"What the fuck?" she said. Alyssa began to panic once she realized what had happened.

"You're ok, babe. You're ok," Duncan told her, shaking her leg with his right hand.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"On the way to meet Phil. Are you ok? Should we get back on the road?"

"Yeah, let's get the fuck out of here before a fucking cop stops."

Duncan moved away from the door and closed it. Alyssa watched him walk around the front of the car to get to his door and then get in. He looked at her. “Are you sure you’re ok?” he asked again.

“Yeah, let’s just get the hell out of here.”

Duncan pulled back onto the highway and switched forward a few songs on the CD. Panic was wearing off, but his adrenaline was still pumping. Alyssa pulled her wet clothes off and reached into the backseat where she found one of Duncan’s t-shirts. It wasn’t clean, but at least it wasn’t covered in puke. Alyssa put it on and pulled her arms inside the sleeves. Duncan sang to the song that was on:

*Life may be sweeter for this, I don't know  
See how it feels in the end  
May Lady Lullaby sing plainly for you  
Soft, strong, sweet and true . . .  
Gone are the days we stopped to decide  
Where we should go  
We just ride  
Gone are the broken eyes we saw through in dreams  
Gone - both dream and lie.*

The two of them made it to the hotel where they were meeting Phil. Phil could tell what was going on as soon as they got to the room. Duncan was carrying both his and Alyssa’s backpacks while pretty much holding her up too. The expressions on both of their faces told Phil exactly what had happened. They got Alyssa in a cool shower and then into a fresh pair of clothes. Phil offered them a beer and a bowlpack. He didn’t ask for a line until Alyssa had passed out, even though that’s what was on his mind. Alyssa slept on one of the beds in the room while they sat on the other and bagged up half of what was left of the Big 8 on the small table next to

the window. Duncan and Phil were going to try to sell most of it in single grams or 20 bags that night in the hotel that way Alyssa wouldn't be worrying about it the next day.

Duncan told her the story a few weeks later, after they had returned home. He told her how he wasn't trying to jostle her leg, that he was shaking that much. How he was so scared he was going to lose her. When Duncan told Alyssa the whole story she had started to cry and Duncan immediately held her in comforting efforts.

Alyssa sat on the floor of her bedroom remembering her and Duncan's trip to Florida last spring. That was the first time she had OD'd—it had happened again, since then. "What the fuck is wrong with me?" she kept asking herself. She got up and looked for a bag to pack some clothes in. She and her mom were going to get her some real help.

~ *Breaking Ground* ~

Pam was trying to check Alyssa in at the hospital like it was a pediatric visit from Alyssa's childhood. It clearly wasn't. Alyssa was over 18, so by law the nurse had to make her mother leave. Alyssa was scared, but she felt a bit of relief now that she knew her mother wouldn't have to bear witness to the whole process.

Pam's voice shook as she hugged her daughter. "It's going to be okay, Alyssa. You're going to be fine. We'll get this figured out."

When they let go of each other Alyssa looked at her mother's face. She saw the tears pool in Pam's eyes and felt hers doing the same. "Mom, don't worry. I will be fine. I have to do this on my own. I will do it this time, I promise."

Alyssa went into the small intake room where the nurse was going to take her vitals and put all of her information into the computer. Alyssa looked up. Her mom was still standing there, teetering at the doorway that led to the exit of the emergency room. Pam mouthed, "I love you" to Alyssa. All Alyssa could do was nod her head yes. She knew if she tried to mouth it back to her the tightness in her throat would break and sobs would pour out. Alyssa clenched her jaw and tried to give her mother a reassuring look; a look her mother knew was only Alyssa trying to be brave. Pam could see how hard Alyssa was trying to keep the corners of mouth from trembling and turning down.

After the nurse took Alyssa's vitals, she began asking Alyssa a long series of questions. Besides the first two, they were same ones she had answered on her psych-eval sheet when she dropped out of school. The nurse asked, "What are you here today for?"

Alyssa answered, "I'm a coke-head and don't want to be."

"So, for drug addiction treatment?"

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And for what drug?”

“Cocaine.”

“And when was the last time you used?”

“About 6:30 this morning.”

“And do you have any drugs or weapons on your person right now?”

“No, ma’am.” Alyssa thought about what the nurse had said: your person. Alyssa had no idea who she was right now. She thought about it again: your person—cocaine’s person.

“All right, darling. Now we have a whole lot more to answer.”

Alyssa wished the nurse would just let her fill in each answer herself instead of going through this whole routine, and waiting for her to put each answer in the computer one by one, but she sat and answered each one.

“These last twenty questions refer to the past twelve months, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Alyssa could see the screen the nurse read off. “Drug Abuse Screening Test (DAST)” was at the top of it. There was a “Yes” or a “No” bubble for the nurse to click under each question. The questions on the screen read:

1. **Have you used drugs other than those required for medical reasons?**  
 Yes  No
2. **Have you abused prescription drugs?**  
 Yes  No
3. **Do you abuse more than one drug at a time?**  
 Yes  No
4. **Can you get through the week without using drugs?**  
 Yes  No
5. **Are you always able to stop using drugs when you want to?**  
 Yes  No
6. **Have you had "blackouts" or "flashbacks" as a result of drug use?**  
 Yes  No
7. **Do you ever feel bad or guilty about your drug use?**  
 Yes  No
8. **Does your spouse (or parents) ever complain about your involvement with drugs?**  
 Yes  No
9. **Has drug abuse created problems between you and your spouse or your parents?**

- Yes  No
- 10. Have you lost friends because of your use of drugs?**  
 Yes  No
- 11. Have you neglected your family because of your use of drugs?**  
 Yes  No
- 12. Have you been in trouble at work because of your use of drugs?**  
 Yes  No
- 13. Have you lost a job because of drug abuse?**  
 Yes  No
- 14. Have you gotten into fights when under the influence of drugs?**  
 Yes  No
- 15. Have you engaged in illegal activities in order to obtain drugs?**  
 Yes  No
- 16. Have you been arrested for possession of illegal drugs?**  
 Yes  No
- 17. Have you ever experienced withdrawal symptoms (felt sick) when you stopped taking drugs?**  
 Yes  No
- 18. Have you had medical problems as a result of your drug use (e.g., memory loss, hepatitis, convulsions, bleeding, etc.)?**  
 Yes  No
- 19. Have you gone to anyone for help for a drug problem?**  
 Yes  No
- 20. Have you been involved in a treatment program especially related to drug use?**  
 Yes  No

Numbers 6 through 12 were hardest for Alyssa—not to answer, but to think about. She was ashamed for how selfish she had been and for what she had put her family through, especially her mother. She was regretful and sorry for her recklessness. She couldn't understand how her parents could still love her after what she and cocaine had done to them. She knew why, because they were family, but she couldn't believe that they were still willing to help her and support her. Alyssa was disappointed in herself. Frustration and anger were beginning to mix with all of the other emotions she was feeling. She desperately wanted a cigarette. The nurse could see her becoming agitated. "Okay, this part's over," she said.

The nurse asked Alyssa to follow her out of the intake room and through the double doors to another section of the emergency room. Another nurse took Alyssa's bag, told her that she was going to go through it and if there was anything in it that she needed to dispose of before hand, Alyssa had better go ahead, and do it.

"There's nothing in it."



“You sure?”

Alyssa nodded.

“Ok, well come with me.” The nurse turned and Alyssa followed. She led her to a small room that looked similar to a jail cell—like one used for solitary confinement. The nurse opened the door and told Alyssa that was where she had to wait until the officer came to transport her to the Freedom House detox unit. Alyssa was amazed by where she was voluntarily putting herself.

She went in as she was told and sat down. The room was empty except for a blue rubber love seat. The nurse closed the door and it automatically locked. There wasn't even a knob or a handle to the door on Alyssa's side. It had a small rectangular window in that had the glass with the wire that ran through it. There was one AC vent and a closed-circuit video camera.

That room said something to Alyssa—the reality of her situation fell upon her. She was locked in there with freak-out-safe furniture and protective glass, chilled by the AC pumping out of the one vent in the ceiling. Alyssa wasn't desperate enough to try to hurt herself or someone else with pieces of real furniture had they been there, and she wasn't crazy enough to try to break through the door or the window. The video camera mounted at the top of the wall above the door kept watch anyway. Good thing someone was monitoring her live feed she thought, but fits like that had occurred before. Maybe she was that crazy she thought. But even if she was, Alyssa didn't have enough energy after being up for days binging on cocaine and booze.

She imagined the others that had been in this room as she waited for a bed to free up at the local detox unit. Maybe the furniture was rubber because it was easier to clean. Easier to sterilize after some crackhead or real dope fiend in withdrawal puked, pissed, shit, or bled on it. What if automatically thinking that the hospital employees that worked in the intake unit thought that she would hurt herself or someone else did show her instability and how cocaine had

affected her psychologically? Alyssa started to think that maybe she did need to be in this type of room after all.

Alyssa balled up in attempts to warm herself. It was freezing in her cell. She imagined that this was how it would feel if she were locked in the walk-in at work. All she had on was a pair of gauchos worn thin from the summer months and a spaghetti-strapped cotton tank top with a built in bra. Alyssa finally fell asleep in the fetal position on the rubber loveseat. A nurse woke her up. A bed was finally available at the Freedom House.

Alyssa crossed her arms over her chest to cover and warm her cold, hard nipples. She knew anyone in the intake would be able to see them if they looked at her. A nurse stood with her and held Alyssa's belongings. They waited outside together at the patient loading dock in the back alley of the hospital, or so that's how Alyssa thought of it. A police officer had to transport her to the Freedom House from the hospital. She wasn't under arrest, but she would be in his custody; it was state regulated rules. Why, she didn't know.

As she got into the cruiser, "You're gonna be fine, darlin'," Joyce, the middle-aged nurse, wearing obnoxious polka dotted scrubs that stood with her waiting, told her. It just happened that officer Evans was taking her to the Freedom House. She had known Jeremy Evans her whole life. His dad was a cop too, which was why he got to stay on the local force. Jeremy was a couple of years younger than Bobby. He had graduated high school with Devon and had dated one of Alyssa's friends, Cassie. It was comforting that a familiar face was taking her to the detox unit, but at the same time, Alyssa didn't like it.

"Lyssa, you'll get through this," Jeremy said. "At least you're putting yourself here and not the law."

Alyssa understood that Jeremy was trying to reassure her and to be comforting, but how could he be from the front seat of the patrol car when she was locked in the back one? There was no good reason anyone should be in the back seat of a patrol car. No one Alyssa ever knew, including herself, had been put in the back of one when something good happened.

“I’m at least going to try.” Alyssa leaned against the door, and rested her head on the glass window—another window she could see out of but not get out from behind of. She watched the streets she was so familiar with go by: Bank of America—goodbye, Monk’s Tap Room—later on, Ben & Jerry’s—that would be good, Wilco— “Jeremy, will you pull in so I can get a pack of smokes?” she asked. “I have money.”

“You know I can’t,” he said. Alyssa didn’t beg. Out of pride or stubbornness, she didn’t know. He saw the frustration on her face and pulled in anyway—no one would know. When he stopped, he said, “Just ’cause I’ve known you so long.”

He bought Alyssa’s brand. She rummaged through her bag for the lighter that she knew was in there. Her hands were shaking. Hell, her whole body was shaking, but she didn’t know if it was because she was coming down and about to crash or if it was a physical response to emotion. Withdrawal? She was scared even though she thought she knew what to expect.

~ *Laying a New Foundation* ~

Alyssa sat up in her bunk and rubbed her eyes, trying to see the clock that hung on the cinderblock wall. Instead of sheep last night, she had counted the blocks over and over again—twelve high and fifteen across, painted antique white, a more yellowish than beige color. It was her third day waking up in her state-owned bed, cold—doctor’s office cold—with her pillow and blanket in the Freedom House. Freedom House? She was beginning to realize that calling this reclaimed house-turned-detox-unit Freedom House did make sense, even if it would or wouldn’t be what ended up liberating her from her dependence.

Her eyes burned. It was six a.m. She felt better than she had the first two days. She had just fallen back to sleep or so it seemed, after being woken up for the two a.m. bed-check, and so she could walk out of her shared room down the hall through the community kitchen on the cold linoleum floor to get her vitals taken. Sleeping vitals? She followed the rules: in bed at nine p.m., lights out by ten. She had tried to sleep last night, but counting the blocks in the wall over and over again while Tonya cried in the bed across the room hadn’t helped. Alyssa wondered if Nancy had gotten any sleep either. Dawn had wheeled in a rollaway for the newcomer, Kitty, at 3:30 a.m. Kitty was checking in on the tail end of a five-day binge.

Alyssa lay in her bed knowing she had to get up. Tonya slept soundly across the room. Nancy was sitting on the edge of her bed putting plush purple socks on.

“Morning, Lyssa.”

It bothered Alyssa when people she didn’t know shortened her name. Considering the circumstances the two were in, she ignored it. She’d probably know Nancy pretty well by the end of all this. Over the past couple of days, they had halfway befriended each other already, even though they didn’t know too much about one another.

“Morning, Nancy. You get any sleep?”

“Some. The meds help. You should get up. Gary’s cutting our room a break since she came in so late last night,” Nancy said with a trembling gesture towards Kitty who was passed out on the rollaway. Nancy and Alyssa both knew that feeling.

Nancy was an alcoholic; Alyssa guessed she was one too, but not like Nancy. Nancy had admitted in group last night that she drank all day, every day. Nancy was pretty, in a countrified kind of way, but Alyssa saw how the booze had been wearing on her. Alyssa watched her as she sat on her bed putting makeup on in the travel mirror she had brought with her.

“Why are you bothering to put makeup on? We all look like hell. And your hands are shaking so badly you can’t make a straight line with that eyeliner anyway. Look, you know you can’t,” Alyssa teased.

“Shut up, Lyssa. And ’cause I like it. It’s what I do. I’m a Mary Kay girl.”

“Do you actually make any money doing that? Because I would never let you give me a makeover. Look, you’re ridiculous,” Alyssa said. She got up and walked over to Nancy. Alyssa felt sorry for her; her hands were shaking so badly her attempt to do her eye makeup was downright pitiful. “Here let me do it.” Nancy and Alyssa exchanged a smile.

“Thanks.”

Alyssa winked at her and said, “No problem, pretty lady. Now you’ll look all fixed up for Gary. You must really need a man.”

“Gary? Yeah right! I got a man. You should go get your vitals done before he gets mad, though.”

Nancy was right. Alyssa did need to go do her morning vitals routine with Gary. Gary was a tall, fat, old man—all together large. Large personality, too. He was twenty-five years

clean, though he only counted nineteen of them. He had gone six straight years sober before relapsing when his mother had died in a car wreck and his girlfriend had left him. He was a hilarious old NA and AA vet. “Aren’t you recovered yet?” Alyssa would joke with him when getting her meds. Everyone that worked at the Freedom House was a recovering addict of some sort except the medical personnel that worked in the other building. The volunteer nurses and two doctors that rotated being on call for the detox unit weren’t recovering addicts either, but all of the counselors were.

Alyssa went down the hall to see Gary and get her generic, state-provided multivitamin, and her prescribed Vitamin-P. That’s what Gary called her Prozac. She hadn’t taken it for months. Despite the habits that had made her put herself here, she was in good spirits and making-do with routine. This had changed from when she had first arrived. She patiently waited in line with the others that strung out the door of the little office where Gary sat until it was her turn. She went in and sat down in the other chair.

“So, Gary, you’re still in recovery?”

“80 over 60, 50 bpm. Low again.”

“It’s always low.”

“Well, don’t pass out on me.”

“I’ll try.”

“Here, don’t forget your meds, dumbass.”

“Thanks, jerk.” Alyssa left and went back down the hall to her room. “Hey, Nancy, you want to go smoke real quick before I get in the shower?”

“Yeah, I’ll go with you, but you gotta bum me one. My man’s gonna drop some off in a little while. Gonna get me a whole carton— you can have some of ’em.”

Nancy and Alyssa went outside to the picnic table where they were allowed to smoke and sat on top of it. “Never in my life would I have thought I’d be sitting here right now,” Nancy said to Alyssa.

“Yeah, me either—well I guess I kind of thought it once or twice.” Alyssa lit her own cigarette and then handed Nancy the lighter.

“I just can’t believe I let him convince me to actually come.” A truck pulled in the entrance. “Never mind. You can have this back. There’s my carton.”

Nancy went over to the truck. Gary yelled at her out of the office window. “I’m watching you, girl! Get back to the picnic area.”

“He’s just dropping me off a carton of smokes, Gary.”

“Well, I’ll come get them. Got to make sure that’s what it really is.” Nancy ran back to the picnic table. Gary came out of the office and walked over to the truck to get the carton of cigarettes.

“Let me get one. See, I told you that’s what it was.” Nancy’s man in the truck waved goodbye, turned around and pulled out. There was a yellow dog in the back of the truck.

“Man, I miss Butch.”

“Who’s Butch?”

“My dog at home. Who’s that? He kind of looks like my friend’s brother. That’s not Cassie’s brother, Clint, is it?”

“How you know Cassie?”

“We used to hang out years ago. I haven’t seen her in a while. I hear the baby’s real cute.”

“Yeah, she is, but Cassie’s a damn bitch sometimes. And yeah, that’s Clint.” Nancy was trying to light her cigarette. Alyssa offered to do it for her. “Thanks, Lyssa. This shit’s so embarrassing.”

“You’ll be good in a couple of days.”

“Yeah, but damn! You know you in withdrawal when you gotta smoke with two hands. It’s just stupid.”

“Aren’t the meds helping any?”

“The Valium takes the edge off and the Atenolol helps some, but hell, not much. Look at me! They give you anything?”

“Nope.”

“You don’t seem like much of a cokehead anyway.”

“Thanks, I guess,” Alyssa said.

“What coke you doing in town anyway?”

“All of it—any of it. No, I’m kidding.”

“You know Bobby?” Nancy asked. Alyssa knew damn well who Nancy was talking about, but she knew better than to run her mouth, whether she was sitting in detox or not. Right then, it all came together, the Sunburst.