

**BENT
HEAVENS**

DANIEL KRAUS

Henry Holt and Company

New York

Henry Holt and Company, *Publishers since 1866*
Henry Holt® is a registered trademark of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC
120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271 • fiercereads.com

Copyright © 2020 by Daniel Kraus
All rights reserved.

Poems and excerpts from *Resurrection Update*, including those used for all section titles, are printed with the permission of James Galvin.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kraus, Daniel, 1975– author.

Title: Bent heavens / Daniel Kraus.

Description: First edition. | New York : Henry Holt and Company, 2020. | Summary: Two years after the disappearance of her father, seventeen-year-old Liv and her friend capture an alien in the Iowa countryside, and instead of turning him over to the authorities, they choose a different path.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019018801 | ISBN 9781250151674 (hardcover)

Subjects: | CYAC: Extraterrestrial beings—Fiction. | Torture—Fiction. | Conspiracies—Fiction. | High schools—Fiction. | Schools—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.K8672 Be 2020 | DDC [Fic]223

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019018801>

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at (800) 221-7945 ext. 5442 or by email at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

First edition, 2020 / Designed by Rich Deas and Mallory Grigg

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Dedicated to

Joe Adam, Craig Brown, Matt Nelson, Jami Shipman

& Scott Slechta

*And then it happened.
Amidst cosmic busting and booming
Gravity snapped,
That galactic rack and pinion.*

*Trees took off like rockets.
Cemeteries exploded.
The living and the dead
Flew straight up together.*

*Only up was gone. Up was away.
Earth still spun
As it stalled and drifted darkward,
Sublime,*

An aspirin in a glass of water.

JAMES GALVIN, “RESURRECTION UPDATE”

FIRST STANZA:

ITALICS MINE

1.

LIV HEARD THE TOWN-HALL BELL GONG

seven times. Everyone knew it was ten minutes slow, which meant twenty minutes until school started. Plenty of time. She stepped off Hamilton Avenue, out of the shadow of the old J. C. Penney building and into the sun-splash of Washington Street. She was joined by ten or fifteen other morning plodders, students bearing packs of schoolwork and adults feeding meters before keying open Dittman's Pharmacy, Bob's Shoe Barn, or First American Bank.

A flagpole stood at the northeast corner of the square. By habit, Liv knocked on it as she passed. She heard the flag snap like wet laundry, but for once did not look up at it, for she was a freshman and had been walking this route for weeks now, and sensed right off something awry at the southern edge of the town square. Everyone else had stopped to look as well. That Liv could only see the backs of heads—no faces—was itself unsettling.

A person had entered the square from the center of Jackson Street, a trajectory that only made sense if you'd emerged from the alley between Wilson Hardware and McAllister's Insurance, and why would you do that? Also strange: The person was pink. You didn't wear pink that early on a Tuesday—not in Bloughton, Iowa, population seven thousand, you didn't.

The person was pink because the person was naked.

He was a man, evident from how his genitals jounced with each lurching step. Walkers stopped walking. Schedules were forgotten. No one ran away, but neither did anyone run toward. The naked man's presence was so jarring amid the sweet birdsong and swishing trees that it was difficult to accept. Only Liv headed for him. Already she could feel in her veins the thrush of urgency.

By the time Liv had trampled through flowers and skidded to a stop in the dewy lawn ten feet from the man, one onlooker had screamed, as if hoping the noise might assure the lot of them they hadn't all gone mad. It worked: People moved. They were Iowans, luckless farmers, withstanders of bankruptcies, witnesses of machine accidents. They knew how to absorb shocks. A mustached guy approached the naked man. A woman stammered to a 911 dispatcher on her phone. An older gent limped up with a cane, coat outstretched, offering to cover the man's nudity.

The old gent succeeded on his third try, the first two times the coat sliding from the man's convulsing shoulders. It gave time for all present to memorize details that, over the next three years, would become local legend.

There was no indication why the man was naked. His chest was

dirty. His calves were crisscrossed with underbrush scratches. His feet should have been bleeding, from rocks if not alleyway glass, except that he wore black dress socks—his only item of clothing. A fantastic detail for sure, though itself not enough to guarantee infamy; a few years back, a football play in neighboring Monroeville had been whistled dead when a young man, drunk and dared, had streaked the length of the field, and a week later it was old news.

What held everyone breathless was the man's behavior. His eyes were fish-wide, defenseless against both sun and cottonwood fluff. He jerked about as if being encircled by a threatening mob. Strands of spit swayed from his bottom lip. His upper lip curled back to reveal clenched teeth. Whines escaped, broken by tongue-tangled babbles. Finally, there was his knee-juddering stagger, as if the planet were fracturing beneath his socked feet. Liv felt it too, the loss of footing. There was no stabilizing flagpole within her reach.

“It's Mr. Fleming,” someone said.

Had it come from a schoolgirl? The old guy with the coat? Bob of Bob's Shoe Barn? Or was it all of them, a choir of condemnation, shaming Liv for not making the identification herself? Whatever had led Lee Fleming to this state of degradation, she should have known about it, because Lee Fleming, in addition to being Bloughton High's senior English teacher for twenty-five years, and the director of every school play, speech competition, and community theater production for the past three decades, was also Liv's dad.

Her intestines knotted. She dropped to her knees and felt the dew soak through her leggings. The person closest to her in the world had been turned inside out. The flagpole was clanging again.

No, it was her heart, transformed into a hammer, driving her into the ground.

Liv was, in fact, mortified she hadn't recognized him first, though, in her defense, he was barely recognizable, stripped of his usual cardigan sweater, ironed slacks, and wire-frame glasses. Naked, he looked underdeveloped, even fetal. As the old man's coat closed around him and Liv heard sirens from the direction of the hospital, her dad's stabbing jabbars shifted to moist inhales and explosive, snotty sobs, noises louder and cruder than any she'd ever heard him make.

The actual event did not exceed five minutes. The hospital, like everything else in Bloughton, enjoyed a direct route to the town center, and an ambulance was the second thing to violate the square that day, rollicking over the curb and bouncing up the sidewalk, chewing up pretty green grass and ejecting two EMTs. They were all over Lee Fleming before Liv, still on her knees and struggling to breathe, could find the courage to reach him. They hoisted his forty-eight-year-old body of soft, but clenched, muscles onto a stretcher.

Certainly they would have beckoned Liv, the man's only child, into the ambulance if they'd known she was there. The medics began administering to her dad before he was even strapped down, and the last thing Liv saw was his limbs thrashing, spittle geysering, all ten fingers pointing at his wet, matted chest hair.

"Biologic evidence!"

They were the first words he'd managed.

The doors slammed, and the ambulance hopped the curb, surging the wrong way down Hamilton, its siren no match for the happy birds, its swirling red lights gulped up by the cheerful sun. Liv piv-

oted in the grass, knees muddying, and watched, thinking there was other biologic evidence here, the provable kind, that tied the raving, naked lunatic to the gasping, kneeling girl.

At least her dad was home, after four days missing.

Eight months and six days later, he would vanish forever.

2.

BONE CRACKED AGAINST GLASS. LIV

sucked air, wobbly, sick. She'd chased the ambulance and fought her way through the back doors, only for it to overturn when it took a corner too fast, and the sound was her bones, or her dad's bones, shattering hypodermics. No—she was lying down, and it was wet. The dewy grass? No, the wet was sweat. Was she in bed? Yes. In bed. The dream again. That terrible memory, ending this time with a fictitious crash. The memory was never going to leave her alone.

The knock again, steady as a woodpecker's. Right: It was Sunday. And not just any Sunday—the last Sunday before senior year began. She'd been waiting for this week for so long. Liv opened her eyes to the fiberglass ceiling panels her dad had installed eight years ago, once upon a time cloud white but now tawny with water damage. Orange was the closest color, given the quality of sun at that hour, which was, of course, seven in the morning. Her father's hour—seven would always be her father's hour.

For the third time, a hard knuckle against her window. The visitor's shadow was cast across the same ceiling at which she stared, not that she needed the shadow to recognize Doug. All week, her excitement to begin her last year at Bloughton High had allowed her, deliciously, to forget the pains of the past. But Sunday always came; so did Doug; so did the memories.

"Doug." She hated the whine in her voice. "Can't you be late for once?"

"Love you, too," Doug said from outside. "I'm going to steal some food, cool?"

Liv sat up and rubbed at the pillow grooves in her cheeks. Her tank top was soaked to her back. She grimaced, distraught like a child who'd wet the bed, and angry, too, for being unable to quit doing it. She peeled herself of damp clothes and kicked through the multicolored mess on her floor for sweatpants.

John, a mud-colored sheepdog mutt of advanced age, struggled to his feet and followed Liv through the house, his claws clicking across scratched hardwood, dull linoleum, and broken tile, and then through the front door. Across the skinny dirt road awaited a mundane panorama of nothing of note: undeveloped farmland stretched into the horizon, thin groves of overgrown trees, and just visible off to the east, a single hill topped with Major Dawkins's former place.

The major had once uttered the only inspirational phrase Liv valued:
Be the tallest you can.

She spoke this charm to herself, attempting to draw her spine tall and straight, forcing the muscles of her torso to tighten and her eyes to open fully. Only after she'd built the best Liv she was going to get

at this odious hour, she shifted her eyes left to the sight she knew would try its best to depress her.

Doug stood in the yard shoving an untoasted Pop-Tart into his face. The disheartening vision fit into the yard's ambience: a cemetery of dead saplings her dad had planted that, since his disappearance, no one had bothered to nurse. The sunrise, by contrast, was a great one, an electric tangerine that coaxed feathered textures from silver clouds. Doug, however, stared at the dirt, as he always did, as if there was something with his neck that hindered looking upward at what the world had to offer.

"You could at least close the cabinets," Liv said. "Every Sunday it looks like we were robbed."

Doug shrugged. Crumbs clung to the greasy tendrils of his shoulder-length hair. John snuffled at the ground for bits.

"Aggie doesn't mind," he said. "If she was up, she'd say, *Go hog wild, Doug.*"

Doug called her mom Aggie and had called her father Lee, a familiarity no other friend of hers had achieved. Liv felt her annoyance soften. She looked where Doug looked, at the dirt, and kicked at an anthill.

"She's never up, though, is she?" she asked.

Liv sighed, bothered by her early-morning urge to criticize Doug. She knew the kitchen cabinets at his house were empty. He didn't eat meals, mostly surviving off trail mix he made from ingredients he bought in military bulk—almonds, peanuts, pine nuts, sunflower seeds, raisins, and dried cranberries. It was a trait he'd picked up from Liv's dad in his final months. All day long, to the ridicule of class-

mates, Doug pulled feed from baggies he kept in the side pockets of the same army-green shorts he wore every day regardless of season. It didn't help that he insisted on using the hikers' term for trail mix, *gorp*, which was too close to *dork* for anyone to resist.

Doug didn't react well to sympathy; he eyed it like a snake he hoped would slither away. In fact, he behaved in ways that invited scorn, as if more comfortable with that emotion. He got to school late, slept through obligations, forgot to shower for days on end. Yet he was never, ever late for their Sunday morning ritual. His fealty to it was a fist that squeezed her heart. She was afraid of what he'd do if she ended the ritual—which is what she wanted to do more than anything.

"You sure you want to do this?" It was as far as she dared. "We could go back inside. I can do better than Pop-Tarts."

"Don't be lazy," he admonished. "You got the screwdriver?"

She held it up with the speed of an eye roll. He saluted the tool and indicated the clear plastic grocery bag tied to one of his belt loops. It was filled, as ever, with John's poop, a week's worth collected from the yard. Here it was, the day before her last year at Bloughton High, and this, ladies and gents, was her life: not blitzing through last-second school shopping with Monica and the gang, but perpetuating a fanaticism that, if anyone ever learned of it, would brand her as loony tunes as her dad. It meant everything to Doug, so she did it for him, in gratitude for the years when he'd been all she'd had.

She stowed the screwdriver in her pocket and set off for the backyard. She was tired and grumpy, but forced herself to smile; Monica said she'd read online that smiling actually forces your brain to be

happier. Right then, something about the light reminded her of a walk she and Doug had taken when they were short enough to breeze beneath these same branches.

“Remember when we walked to the firehouse?” she asked.

“Those guys were jerks,” Doug said through his last bite of Pop-Tart.

The backyard was in shoddier shape than the front. The push mower had rotted where it had died, searing the grass with gasoline. The swing set’s collapse had contorted it into a briar of sharp steel. All over, there were piles. How else to say it? Piles of brick, piles of plank wood, piles of buckets. No one remembered why Lee had piled them. The grass had become shin-high bracken and knee-high sedge, a jungle gym from which ticks swung until they found John’s belly.

“They were perfectly nice firemen,” Liv said.

“They came at us with axes!”

“They were *holding* axes. They were firemen. Firemen hold axes. They just weren’t used to kids showing up with a list of demands.”

Doug chuckled. Now Liv’s forced smile became real. The firehouse visit was the kind of jaunt that had made knowing the younger Doug Monk such a thrill. Doug was the best kid to play with; he always arrived armed with multiple proposals of stuff to do, each so original they made their sleepy Iowa burg feel like a place where incredible things happened all the time.

All kids heard things—from their families, on the playground. Only Doug took rumors as dares. *Liv, did you hear there was a barn on Sycamore where a guy built a “monster” from dead-animal parts? They say he lets people see it for a few bucks! Liv, did you hear about the guy who used to live above Fielder’s Auto? He robbed graves. You think we should sneak up there and see if we can find anything cool?*

“There was a dude buying firecrackers from my dad once.” Doug spoke in the animated voice Liv alone in the world got to hear. “And he said he used to be a volunteer firefighter, and he *swore* the firehouse had a chunk of meteor.”

“I’m just saying,” Liv said, “who would even believe that? I didn’t think it could be real.”

“A meteor hitting Bluefeather Prison? Why wouldn’t that be real?”

Liv laughed, and the happy sound helped, now that they had waded halfway into the backyard. John held back. It was dangerous out there; his old master had taught him that. He whined, lay down by the door, and watched Liv, the closest thing he had now to a master, walk straight toward what he sensed was still a bad place.

What the homes at Bloughton’s outskirts lacked in stores, gas stations, and reliable cell coverage they made up for in real estate. The backyard was a third of a football field long, the back half of which was nearly vacant. In the far southeast corner of the backyard was Lee’s shed, a storage facility for gardening tools until the day he stumbled naked onto the town square. After that, he began to fill it with tools of a different kind.

The cobwebs over the shed’s door were as thick as boards.

Even Doug knew better than to talk about it. He leaned into good-mood joshing.

“And what did we learn that day?” he asked in the voice of a snooty professor.

“Firemen hate kids?”

“That they had the meteor! Right there in a glass case like the firecracker dude said!” He shook his head hard enough for his greasy whips of hair to sway. “Man, no one ever believes me about shit.”

A flimsy fence marked the southern border of the yard, though Lee had used wire cutters to expedite passage. Liv went first into the thicket, hoping her mood could survive it. It couldn't. The coolness of the shade made her grinning lips go cold. Jokes and nostalgia might get them through this Sunday excursion, and the next, and the next, twelve more months before she escaped to college. Was letting this continue mercy or cowardice? Because each Sunday hurt her, which meant each Monday was spent building herself back into the Liv Fleming that Monica and the others expected.

“Speaking of firecrackers . . . Mr. Tooney, Angie Tooney’s dad? He came out Tuesday. I guess there’s some anniversary party? Anyway, Mr. Tooney definitely did his research because he was like, ‘Give me five girandolas, five roman candles, two chrysanthemums, two flying fish, and one giant peony.’ He had this envelope of cash he tried to give me before I even told him what I had in stock. He acted like he was buying coke. He wasn’t even listening to the safety instructions.”

There was one reason Bloughton didn’t wipe Doug’s family from its mind. Unless you wanted to truck your ass to the Missouri line, the Monks were it when it came to illegal fireworks. They were stored in a separate garage, the only building on the Monk property kept watertight, air-conditioned, locked, and free of critters, and because Doug’s dad set the prices, Doug had no room to haggle. It also meant he had no leeway to deny kids who forked over insults along with payment. Liv hadn’t been to Doug’s place in years and was glad. She couldn’t stomach the notion that the Fleming household had caught up to the Monks’.

“I think he was nervous because he had this little boy with him. I

think he was worried the kid would say the wrong thing at the party and expose him as an illegal-fireworks-buying criminal and he'd end up serving life in prison, hard labor. People are so dumb."

Fireworks sales were what kept the lights on and the toilet flushing. Doug's dad, a trucker, touched down in Bloughton six or seven times a year to dole out truck-stop trinkets and drop off fireworks gathered from across the country. He'd stay for a couple of weeks before getting itchy for the road and his various girlfriends. Doug's mom had never been in the picture. The only role model Doug had ever had was Lee Fleming. Now all he had was Lee's memory. Liv carried the responsibility of that, which was why she was here, kicking through stickerbush at dawn.

"So the kid starts crying how he wants to see something explode, and Mr. Tooney definitely didn't want this kid crying all day about it, so he asked if I could just shoot something off for an extra twenty. And I was like, 'It's two in the afternoon, man, you won't be able to see anything,' but he was practically begging. I didn't want to burn good fireworks no one could see, but remember when I cleaned out my car?"

Two years of Sunday safaris had tramped a thin trail through the woods. Liv banked right at the dry gulley, circled a towering black ash, and ducked under a marquee of threaded branches, eyes squinted for the flash of metal that marked their first stop.

"I found a flare in the back seat. I didn't know I had a flare. So I said, 'Here, how about I shoot this?' and Mr. Tooney said fine, and I did it, and we could even see it for a second. Pretty boring, but the kid liked it, and then they left, and I went back to my game, and

then like an hour later I smell smoke and I look outside and there it was. A fire. You know that field of dry grass across the road? There's this whole line of fire where I guess the flare went down. I almost shit."

Liv looked over her shoulder at Doug. He was talking past gorp, grinning to his tale. Doug was on the short side, but not bad-looking, with a fox face and shoulder-length black hair so thick you couldn't see scalp, not even when wind split it. In middle school he'd bought dumbbells at a garage sale and, in classic Doug fashion, committed to a workout routine of pointless rigor, developing tennis-ball biceps while ignoring every other muscle of his body. Today, and nearly every day, he wore a sleeveless T-shirt to show off his arms.

"I went out there to stomp it but it was too big and I only had flip-flops, so I had to call the fire department. I'm not even kidding. They asked what happened, and I couldn't remember if I'd sold fireworks to any of them before, so I said I didn't know. But I must've sold one of them something, because he covered up for me and said it was probably lightning. I spent the whole next day out there making sure there weren't pieces of flare I had to hide. I don't need the FBI on my ass. Now I'm out a flare and my flip-flops are melted. Fucking sucks, man."

Doug pointed, his preposterous biceps flexing, as if Liv didn't know exactly, precisely, down-to-the-square-foot where they were headed. She faced front again, though her eyes dragged behind. Looking upon this ugly metal contraption hidden in the woods was as close as she got to looking at the corpse of her father.

3 .

IT WAS A TRAP. TRAP ONE, AS LEE FLEMING called it, or, when stirred by the fever of creation, Amputator. Based on the centuries-old model used by fur trappers, it was a stainless-steel spring-loaded set of jaws chained to a tree trunk that, when triggered by pressure upon the center plate, would snap shut, its triangular teeth driving into both sides of the trespasser's leg. Whether the prey was fox, coyote, bobcat, raccoon, or possum, the pain would make it pull, digging the trap's teeth in deeper, tearing tendon and muscle until the animal could only try to gnaw off its own leg.

How many hundreds of times had Liv looked at this thing that Lee had hammered, jointed, screwed, soldered, and sharpened in the shed? And still she flushed with shame. If the rust blotches and the weeds threaded through the spring eye were real, and they were, then everything else had to be real, too, from her father's original

town-square calamity to his plunge into delusion, paranoia, psychosis, and sickness.

Amputator was only the first of six traps Lee had placed at cunning intervals across the thicket, each one guarding an avenue of approach to the house. Reproducing a single trap design six times would have taken less effort, but who was to say which sorts of traps would be effective against his alleged abductors? He was determined to cover his bases. He'd rather die, he'd often said, than be dragged back into their hellish realm.

Trap Two, Hangman's Noose, was the simplest and, when triggered, the most dramatic. Constructed from wood Lee had sawed from nearby trees (to ensure that it smelled native to the location), the trap did, in fact, resemble an archetypal hanging post. It was tripped by a wire noose hidden in the grass. A camouflage-painted cinderblock acted as counterweight, so that when the wire cinched tight, the weight would sink and the boom would spring upward, and the prey would find itself dangling upside down.

Trap Three, Crusher, was brutality incarnate and scary to manage. A six-hundred-pound log studded with nails, each one sharpened to a point by Lee's diamond-stone file, hung ten feet in the air from a galvanized reeling cable wound through a mountaineer's carabiner to serve as its own trip wire. It was the only trap never to have gone off and that was lucky. Liv doubted that she and Doug could hoist the log back into place.

Trap Four, Hard Passage, was the only trap featuring bait, a stiff wad of Lee's unwashed clothing that, when the wind was right, still gave Liv a whiff of her dad's smell. It was a cage trap, the sort park

rangers used to capture live animals, and the enemies of Lee's imagination would have to crawl inside it. This would disrupt a magnetic field and a guillotine-style door would drop. The only option then would be to move forward through a series of sharp, slanted rods that turned even an inch of retreat into a flesh-rendering nightmare.

Trap Five, Neckbreaker, was the woods' most elegant killer. It was a standard conibear trap blown up man-sized, two rectangular steel frames that sliced shut like a scissors when an invader passed through them, which anyone choosing this route would do, Lee said, since Neckbreaker was positioned beneath a fallen tree that was easier to duck under than clamber over.

Trap Six, Abyss, was Lee's tour de force of despair. Constructed beneath a fake "path" he'd created for the sole purpose of duping intruders into taking it—the path led nowhere—it was a seven-foot pit covered with a polyethylene sheet propped up by delicate braces, atop which, in each Sunday's most laborious task, Doug and Liv styled dirt, pebbles, moss, and sticks to fabricate a natural-looking forest floor. If you stepped on it, you'd fall, and the pit's floor was covered with dozens of punji spikes, which was why Doug brought the bag of John's feces. He dumped it over the spikes so that any delivered wounds would become infected.

Lee Fleming was the gentlest man you'd ever meet. Everyone in town said as much. Liv tried to remember that.

The illegality of this line of defense was as flagrant as it was moot. No one had any reason to wend their way through this half-mile arc of trees, though were some lost soul to do so, he might be seriously injured, if not killed. Liv's whole face was cold now. She thought, as

she did every Sunday, that she might never smile again. Each of Lee's traps screamed insanity. How could Doug not see that?

Doug stepped past Liv, holding out a hand for the screwdriver, which she placed into it like a surgeon's scalpel. He knelt alongside Amputator and set it off with the screwdriver, just to make sure everything worked. Then he levered the shank of the tool until the steel jaws yowled apart. Loosen the spring neck. Pry the jaws flat. Fix the trigger. Liv hissed. There was always a second when Doug got close to getting maimed. More than a second, really. A full minute, a full day, a year, a lifetime. One of these days he'd be torn apart.

"Check out this rust," he said. "We need to soak this in oak bark. It needs re-dyed. It needs re-waxed, too."

It needs removed, Liv thought. Destroyed, junked, smelted.

He was up, smearing dirty hands on his shorts, taking the lead down the trail. Liv was hit by a surge of courage. Quick, before they reached the next trap, say something, break through the facade that everything about this was okay.

"How come you . . . like this so much?"

There, she said it. To his back, yes, but still. Doug's gait didn't change.

"*Like?* I *like* kung fu movies and porn. This is just something we gotta do, Liv."

"But . . . you know. It's a project. You like projects."

"Tell that to my Ds and Fs."

"But, like, the corn mazes."

Doug laughed once, bitterly.

“That was a long, long, long time ago.”

It didn't seem that long ago to Liv. It was no coincidence that it'd been Lee who'd taken Liv and Doug, both ten years old, to Lomax County, where an industrious farmer had carved into his corn a thirty-acre maze in the shape of Abraham Lincoln. Liv thought there had been something sinister about the endless corners, intersections, and roundabouts, all while corn leaves shivered as if the stalks were snickering at her. As the sun began to set, only her dad's held hand prevented Liv from sprinting a straight line through the corn until she came out somewhere, anywhere.

Doug, though, had fallen in love. His father supplemented trucking and fireworks income by renting out fifteen acres of family-owned land on the other side of town, which he called the Monk Block. Most of it was being farmed for corn and, to Doug, that was proof enough of destiny. Maybe his wouldn't be the world's biggest corn maze, but who cared about biggest? The Monk Block Corn Maze would be the best.

On paper as small as napkins and as big as the backs of posters, Doug sketched hundreds of mazes. Early designs came in obvious shapes: skull and crossbones, a snake, the X-Men logo. Year by year, they evolved and refined. Doug became a connoisseur of confusion. Never much of a reader before, he checked out library books about patterns that challenged human perception.

Go slowly, Liv told herself. *Build up to it*. She raised her voice. “There was some pattern you used? To confuse people?”

“The Ebbinghaus illusion,” Doug said instantly. “Tricks the mind into confusing relative size.” He chuckled. “And then I blended it

with the Ponzo illusion and the Hermann grid. Man, I would have had people lost for *days*.”

He sounded too gleeful about this, but Liv couldn't blame him. People were shitty to Doug—folks who bought fireworks, kids at school, staff at stores who just didn't like the look of him. Of course he imagined them all trapped inside some brilliant labyrinth of his own design.

“What did you call it? All the patterns together? The Prank?”

“The *Trick*.” He sounded irritated that she'd forgotten, even though, seconds ago, he'd been the one to claim that he'd all but forgotten it. “That's the thing about most mazes. They were such massive suck-ups. ‘Oh, here's a big Abe Lincoln head.’ ‘Here's a salute to our stupid military.’ Mazes are ancient. There's mazes carved on prehistoric bones. You gotta respect that. I used ancient runes and mathematic fractals in mine. That stuff is pure.”

“I remember one of yours shaped like a spider. Real pure, Doug.”

“It was! Humans are hardwired to fear things with long legs. I read that.”

The conversation was as difficult as Liv had feared. She knew Hangman's Noose was just around the bend, yet wondered if she'd gotten that wrong, for it felt like the trap had slipped behind her and dropped its noose around her throat, slowly stealing her air as she walked.

“I'm just saying,” Liv said, “that you left all that behind. Maybe, you know, maybe now's the time . . .”

“I didn't leave it behind. No one was *with* me on it. You certainly never liked it.”

Now he was mad. It could happen that quick with Doug, and though she knew she had to stay firm, she heard herself backpedaling.

“That’s not true. I thought it was really—”

“It is true, Liv. I tried to come up with ways for you to be involved.”

This was bullshit, but just what Liv needed. Irritability fired from her brain, and she could almost see it, a cigarette lighter spark.

“Yeah, you told me I could sell tickets to the haunted house off the side. Sell cider and corndogs at the snack bar. Perfect for the little woman. Gee, thanks.”

He stopped with an underbrush crunch and looked back at her. As quick as Doug could be to anger, he was even quicker to be hurt. His startled, wet-eyed look of betrayal made Liv feel awful, all at once, because what she’d said was unfair. Back when he’d made that offer, it’d been because Liv, scared of corn mazes, had been nervous about Doug’s enthusiasm.

And what had happened after that? Doug’s cardboard tubes of mazes had disappeared, and it had been her fault. Maybe if she’d supported him more, he’d still be working on those harmless plans instead of having shifted his energy to the absurdity of maintaining Lee Fleming’s traps.

“That’s not true,” Doug said softly. “And you know it.”

His eyes swept downward, rather pitifully, and he continued on, his bare knees not lifting quite so high now, the bag of poop on his belt not flopping so vigorously.

By the time she caught up to him, he should have been resetting Hangman’s Noose. Instead, he was staring, and her stomach

clenched. At least once a month it happened, and naturally it had to happen today: an animal caught. The Iowa timber was rife with underbrush scurriers that, unlike Lee's intended targets, actually existed. Liv didn't like to picture all the dead or dying animals they'd extracted.

They was the wrong word. It was Doug who did the deed while Liv squinted through the protective slats of her lashes. Today it was only a squirrel—*only*, as if that minimized the suffering, and suffering was what it was doing, the wire pulled tight around its tiny neck, its four feet scabbling midair. The noose was designed for a bigger creature and hadn't cinched tight enough for a clean kill.

How many hours had the squirrel been hanging here? How many days? Doug glanced at Liv, his jaw jutted against reproach, and took the squirrel by the midsection, loosening the wire with the screwdriver and sliding the animal free. Doug stepped over to the oak tree he'd used for this very purpose so many times Liv could see the scarred bark, and brought the squirrel back for the head blow that would kill it.

Doug hesitated, waiting for Liv to turn away. She always did. But today she couldn't. She'd had a chance this morning to change things and had blown it. As screwed up as Doug's trapping and killing was, he did it out of love—for Lee, yes, but also for her. So her apology was this: not turning away. Liv would try again next week. Or the week after that. Surely she would.

Doug smiled, just a twitch of the lips, before whipping the squirrel forward in a brown blur. The snap of its head was crisp, and without pausing, Doug tromped past the tree and off the trail into

brambles, because you had to bury animals away from the devices that killed them. That was just smart hunting.

Liv watched him disappear, then turned back to Hangman's Noose. She could reset the trap. She knew how. It would be a nice gesture. She hunkered down, took hold of the snare, and pulled against the weight. Two years had passed since her dad had vanished, but his traps, all six of them, still worked. Just look at the creature they'd trapped today. Look at her try to gnaw her leg free, silly thing. The creature's name was Liv Fleming.

4 .

IT TOOK TWENTY MINUTES TO GET TO senior year's first calamity. After parking her dad's too-recognizable station wagon far from the building, the first nineteen minutes were everything Liv had dreamed about. This was the thirteenth first day of school of Liv's life, and the exhilaration of knowing it to be the final one for her and her friends could only be countered by blatant coolness. When Monica fist-bumped Liv hello, Monica was impersonating the jittery theatrics of the younger classes. Liv took the cue, and, while hugging Krista, who'd been out of state all summer, she did so with a bored yawn that made Krista laugh.

"We're so over this," Krista said.

"We're doing the teachers a favor," Liv agreed. "Don't want to hurt their feelings."

Darla and Phil swung by, Phil's hand already in Darla's back pocket, placing his usual bet that no teacher wanted conflict on the

first day of school, thereby setting the precedent that Phil could have his hand on Darla's ass all year. Darla kiss-kissed at Liv, who made a facetious yuck face and tossed the kiss back.

Then Laurie, Amber, and Hank descended upon them in a sheet of excited shouts and hugs so forceful Liv could not tell who she was hugging at any given second. Except maybe Hank, whose hug was quick; the one-night sexual encounter she'd had with Hank last year still hadn't fully shed its awkwardness. The whole gang's coolness, so perfectly drawn a few minutes ago, broke apart, and they yielded to it. It was thrilling, being at the edge of whatever came after.

When the group began to disassemble to find their lockers and unload their stuff, Liv found Krista still clinging to her with two adamant fists.

"Just once, and then I won't mention it again," Krista said. "Just doing my fall check."

Liv sighed to convey that this wasn't necessary, but in truth felt a deep gratitude. Liv was a relative newcomer to this crowd (sports girls, mostly, and the guys who liked them) and sometimes still felt like a fraud: Hank and Phil going on about some grade school prank they'd pulled on an old friend of Liv's, or Monica, when she was feeling bitchy, celebrating old times with the others without letting Liv in on the joke. Krista, though, had a heart and, when Monica wasn't around to chide her for it, knew how to use it.

"Make it quick," Liv teased.

"Your dad—nothing?"

Liv shook her head. Still smiling. Keep up the smile. None of this hurts, none of it.

“And your mom—she’s . . . ?”

Keep smiling. “She’s fine. Same. I mean, she’s fine.”

Krista tilted her head skeptically, an angle sharp enough to dig under Liv’s ribs and hit something soft. Liv grabbed Krista by both shoulders and pretended to shake sense into her like men did to hysterical women in old movies. The pain of that little cut, however, did not go away.

“She’s okay!” Liv play shouted. “I’m okay! Everything’s okay!”

Krista pretended to zip her lips. “All right! I’ll shut up about it, forever and anon.”

“Too much British lit for you. Get a life.”

Krista nodded guiltily and slunk off for her locker. Liv heard the squeak of a sneaker stopping suddenly and turned to see Krista, who had leaned back to speak more quietly.

“I meant to tell you. I came in the back way, by the band room. And Doug Monk was there with a bunch of idiots. I know you and Doug . . .”

Krista trailed off—of course she did—because no one in Monica’s group knew how to finish that sentence. Liv and Doug *what?* Liv herself wasn’t certain. To the others, Liv supposed, Doug was a bewildering holdover from an older version of Liv Fleming, a Liv none of them were particularly interested to know. And it was for reasons just like this: first day of school, everything going great, and suddenly there’s some situation near the band room.

Liv nodded an embarrassed thanks and took off for the stairs. The bottom floor at this hour was nothing but lonely halls. Away from watchful eyes, she sped up, past the shuttered home-ec kitchen and

vo-ag wing, until she'd homed in on the southeastern bottom-floor stairwell, at the weird intersection of the chorus room and wrestling room. It was the hour of neither singing nor wrestling, and yet there huddled a group of four boys, just like Krista had said, their school-bags slung across mom-ironed shirts so as to better record video on their phones. Each screen gave Liv a mini but unobstructed view of a scene that was as preposterous as it was predictable.

Doug was lying on his back on the floor, his hair spread out beneath his head like black tentacles. The parachute pockets of his shorts sagged to the floor with payloads of gorp. From all indications, Doug had been persuaded to bench-press Jackson Stegmaier, a kid who had what teachers called a “developmental delay.” He was skinny with narrow shoulders, both of which, Liv hated to admit, did give him a barbell shape. The stunt was absurd, hence the laughter, hence the twist in Liv's gut.

The videos would be uploaded by day's end. By tomorrow, they'd be flickering from every gadget in sight. Jackson Stegmaier wasn't Liv's problem; he'd deal with it. Doug, though—Doug never made anything easy. Sweat rolled down his scarlet face as he pumped the kid up and down while a jerk named Billy shouted out reps. What Doug didn't get, what he never got until too late, was that the boys cheered only to mock him.

Liv sighed. It wasn't an indulging-Krista sigh. It was an extended, weary exhale, the sound of envisioning two more semesters of situations like this, every one of which forced her to keep a foot in a world she'd rather step beyond. Doug cutting power to the biology-class refrigerator to hide how bad he'd messed up his fetal pig, never

thinking of the floor-wide stench that would result. Doug taking a dare to ride the bumper of a school bus, leading to stricter bus rules that pissed off everyone. And on and on.

Billy had taken a seat atop Jackson Stegmaier, pretending to ride a mechanical bull. Three cameras pressed inward. Some of these degenerates were whizzes at editing, and if they pooled their footage, the video could be split screen or multiple point of view, alternating between Doug's face and Jackson's face before cutting to the crowd-pleasing wide shot. It would be a smash hit, setting the bar for the whole semester, unless Liv did something.

She grabbed the closest boy's shoulder.

"Hi, Liv!"

That's what the boy said. It made her feel lousy about her risen social status over the past couple of years that anyone would think she had come here to enjoy the fun. She shoved the boy. He was too big to forcibly move, but the contact surprised him enough to withdraw. She swiped at the second boy's phone, intending to knock it free, but although she struck it perfectly, the boy managed to keep hold of it. The third boy, witness to Liv's onslaught, wisely evaded, tucking his phone into his pocket.

Three seconds had passed, and Liv now turned to deal with Billy, still astride Jackson. Infuriatingly, Billy laughed, seeming to enjoy making Liv use her full body weight to pull him off. Jackson, as seemed his lot in life, took the brunt of it, hitting the floor with one of his fragile shoulders and shrieking, then staggering away while clutching the shoulder. Billy fell straight onto Doug's stomach, still laughing. When Liv snatched for his phone, he easily dodged.

“C’mon, Liv.” He fake pouted. “Don’t be a bitch about it.”

She kicked him in the shin. He chuckled through his pain, which drove her crazy. The other boys were retreating with their videos safely archived, less ashamed than they were aware that classes were about to begin. This event meant nothing to them; they’d already half forgotten it, as evidenced by their amiable farewells.

“Nice kick,” said the first of them.

“You’re on your period—we get it,” said the second.

“See you at lunch, Liv!” said the third.

Billy got up and danced away from Liv’s closing kicks, still laughing, and then it was just her and Doug, alone again at the scene of a crime. Billy’s fall had knocked the wind out of Doug, and he was gasping for air, but calmly. He’d been squashed plenty of times before. This wasn’t Liv’s first time, either; she crossed her arms and glared at him.

“What,” he panted, “is your”—gasp—“problem?”

“*My* problem?”

“We were just having fun.”

“No, *they* were having fun.”

“Whatever.”

“Did it look like Jackson was having fun?”

“Until you showed up.”

Doug winced and sat up. Sunflower seeds and pine nuts were everywhere.

“Oh no,” he said. “My gorp.”

He began sweeping food into his hand and funneling it back into the violated bag. He flushed a bit, perhaps realizing that if eating off the floor wasn’t humiliating, what was?

“Floor’s clean” was his excuse. “First day of school, everything’s clean.”

“It *is* the first day of school. That’s right. And already look at you.”

“I don’t need your advice. Go find your stupid friends.”

“You do need my advice. And my advice is to stop letting people do this to you! You do it willingly!”

“Oh, now you want to help. Yesterday, though, you barely wanted to check the traps. Probably thought it might mess up your nails.”

That one burned. Because the thought had, in fact, crossed her mind. In the past, the branches above Hangman’s Noose had scratched up her face, the gears of Neckbreaker had ripped out a lock of her hair, and, yes, the door of Hard Passage had broken one of her fingernails. Was it so horrible that she wanted to go to school not looking like a savage? She looked down. The knuckles of her right hand were scuffed, bleeding a little. The excited newness she’d felt upon entering the school had burned down to exhausted anguish.

“I know you think I ignore you here,” she said.

“You do.”

“It’s just . . .” She shrugged miserably. “I’m trying to make everyone happy, all right? Including myself. *Including myself.*”

He said nothing, keeping his eyes on his gorp, pouring from hand to bag.

She turned on a heel. “I’ve gotta go.”

“Hey,” Doug said.

She stopped. Sighed. Didn’t turn back. But she did lower the defensive set of her shoulders.

“I’ll track down Jackson at lunch,” Doug said. “Tell him sorry.”

Liv listened and waited.

“Little weirdo only did it because we asked,” he added.

Liv nodded at the stairs in front of her. “Let’s just try to get through this year with minimum catastrophes. It’s our last year, you know?”

“I wish it weren’t,” Doug said softly.

“Come on,” she said. “You hate school.”

“I know you want everything to change, Liv, but what comes after this? For me? I just wish . . . things could stay the same.”

Liv closed her eyes for a second, absorbing another small slash of pain. She’d been able to prod Doug on Sunday morning precisely because she’d been looking at his back, not his face, and the same thing held true here. With her back turned, a speck of truth could be set free.

“Things can’t.”

Silence from Doug. The rustle of gorp had stopped. She couldn’t even hear him breathe.

“Better get to class,” he said, and his lack of acknowledgment that no one would care if Doug Monk made it to class on time was the last jab of pain Liv could bear. She nodded, grateful for being granted release, and rushed up the stairs while wondering what would happen if she turned around. What would it look like to stare truth in the face after two years of avoiding it? Maybe it would feel like freedom, like destroying old traps instead of setting them, over and over, despite knowing there was nothing new to catch.

5 .

LIV SKIDDED INTO HOMEROOM AT THE

clang of the bell, earning applause from the teacher and hoots from her friends, quite the opposite reaction Doug would receive. She took the open seat, right in front, and was glad that the hour was taken up with first-day preliminaries: going over schedules, the year calendar, the sorts of things devoid of emotion.

She didn't realize how much she'd been dreading second period until she sat down at a desk, this time way in back, to the confusion of Phil and Darla, and felt her muscles tighten against the chair. It was English, the class that should have been taught by her father, in the same room she'd visited so many times as a kid. The teacher who'd replaced Mr. Fleming, both as English teacher and drama coach, Ms. Baldwin, had made the room her own, but Liv couldn't stop seeing the shelf behind Baldwin's desk that had once held thirty-five copies of James Galvin's *Resurrection Update*—the book that had meant so much to Lee Fleming, right up until the end.

The shelf didn't even hold books anymore. It held idiotic troll dolls with multicolored hair. It shouldn't have aggravated Liv, but it did. She had avoided exchanging a single word with Ms. Baldwin in the two years they'd shared the same building, even though the woman had done nothing worse than show an affinity for ugly dolls. Liv knew it wasn't fair to Baldwin. It was only English.

Then Baldwin said the five words that earned any teacher ire: *Get to know your neighbor*. Next to the imbecilic Name Game, it was the most tedious of first-day time wasters, in which students were forced to pair off, interview a classmate, and then introduce that classmate aloud. Ridiculous, considering the size of the school and how long most of them had known one another. The shtick was likely for Baldwin's benefit, another reason for Liv to resent it.

Mired in disgruntlement, Liv moved too slowly. Darla chose Phil, of course, and every teammate Liv could see quickly paired off. She was recalculating when a fist knock-knocked her desk. She looked to her right and found the wide, dazzling grin of a boy she'd never seen before. He was tall and long-limbed. What stuck out most was his obvious sense of style, a rare quality in high school boys. His clothing was probably secondhand but actually fit, and was tucked and rolled where most guys would have ends flapping and flopping.

"I'm Bruno!" he cried, as if they were long-lost companions.

The grin kept going. He had great teeth, their bright white set off against skin further darkened by actual stubble. Hair, indeed, looked to be his biggest struggle: It puffed from beneath his shirt cuffs, and a gallon of gel must have been used to sculpt that swoop on top of his head. Liv looked all right today—she'd gotten up early to tie her

hair in a neat bun at the nape of her neck. Bruno's unguarded gaze, though, made her doubt.

"I'm Liv," she said.

"Yeah, I know. Let's buddy up."

Buddy up? Liv threw out a desperate look for someone who might be less challenging than this guy, and, finding none, shrugged. Bruno scooted his desk; it bumper-carred against hers. Everyone else was doing the same, and the noise helped Liv relax. She took out a fresh notebook and inked on the first page *BRUNO*.

"Let's see: I'm Bruno Mayorga, I'm seventeen, I was born in Nuevo León—that's a Mexican state—but was still a baby when I came to Iowa. I only moved to Bloughton this summer, but I plan to work on the school paper, and do lots of drama, and also chorus, and hopefully a couple small groups. I'll probably join the tennis team, even though I'm not very good, but I hear the team is terrible, so maybe I'll actually get to play. I have three sisters named Mia, Elena, and Bianca, and three dogs. I'm into music, but that's super boring. Why did I even mention that? Who's not into music? Oh, my dad is still in Mexico. I basically don't know him. I know you don't really have a dad, too. I don't mean to be awkward about that. Sorry if that's awkward."

Liv finished writing before exhaling.

"You're an easy interview," she said.

"Yeah, but that's because I want to talk about something else."

Liv felt her shoulders close up as they did any time her past was questioned. *Don't do that*, she instructed herself. *Be the tallest you can.*

"And what's that?" she asked.

He clicked his own pen, gestured at his blank page.

“Let’s get this done first. You’re Olivia Fleming. I’m guessing you’re also seventeen? You don’t have any siblings, if I remember what I heard, and you’re in like twenty-eight sports.”

“Where’d you learn all that?”

“Oh, just from people this summer. I always do some ground-work before starting at a new school.”

“Why do you keep starting at new schools?”

Another big grin, though this one looked strained. “Hey, we’re done with me. Did I get all your details right? No pets?”

“Yeah, a dog.”

“Oh! Tell me about the dog. Dogs go over great in these things. If you’ve got a picture on your phone we might not have to talk at all.”

“Well, his name is John, and he’s a blue-heeler mix—”

“His name is John?”

“My dad named him. After a poet.”

“Which poet?”

“I can’t remember. John somebody.”

Bruno laughed. It fit with his grin—comforting, welcoming. He took a note.

“‘Dog named after John the poet.’ That’s good stuff. Anything else?”

Liv sighed. “What’s the point? All these people know me. We’ve been going to school together forever.”

“You don’t know me.”

“Yeah, but you get the basic idea about someone, just by being awake. You can tell who’s nice or whatever.”

“Am I nice? Or am I whatever?”

“You’re nice.”

“Then why do you look so scared of me?”

“I’m not scared. I just—you’re talkative. And I’m tired.”

“Haven’t had your coffee yet. You’re definitely a coffee drinker.”

“I guess you can add that to your notes. ‘Drinks coffee.’ God, that’s why these things suck. You either sound boring or like you’re desperate for attention.”

“And it’s probably hardest for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know. Your dad. Like, that’s interesting. I’ve only heard a little bit of it, and even I can tell it’s *super* interesting. But because it’s unhappy, we all have to pretend like it doesn’t exist. ‘I drink coffee, and my dog is named John’ sort of pales in comparison.”

Liv gave Bruno a careful look. Was the offhand way in which he mentioned her dad disturbing or disarming? Nothing duplicitous could hide behind such a smile.

“You said you wanted to talk about something,” she said.

Bruno leaned closer and raised a conspiratorial eyebrow.

“I saw you bust up those guys this morning, and it was *amazing*.”

Liv slapped down her pen and covered her eyes.

“Oh Jesus. Is the video out already?”

“No! I mean, I don’t know. I saw it in person.”

“There were people watching?”

“It isn’t like there was a whole crowd. It was just me. You didn’t see me because you were busy kicking all sorts of ass. Like I said, I want to join the chorus. I went down there to introduce myself to Mrs. Meachum.”

“I’m going to end up in the video, I just know it, and then it’s just going to be more . . .”

“More what?”

“More I have to deal with. Like why I’m still sticking up for Doug Monk.”

“What’s wrong with sticking up for Doug Monk?”

“In all your summer spying, you never heard anything about Doug Monk?”

“Not spying. Research. And no, he never came up.”

“What am I supposed to say? I guess he’s an old friend.”

“And your new friends don’t like him. That’s how it goes.”

“They just don’t understand . . . I mean, unless you know Doug, he can seem . . . he’s tough to talk to. His family life is weird. He’s basically on his own. It’s hard.”

“Well, I think what you did was heroic. It was about the most heroic thing I’ve ever seen. You’re a hero.”

“Shut up.”

“I’m serious here. It was really, truly amazing. You see that stuff in movies, but in real life? You tore those assholes new assholes.”

“If I’d been a guy, it would’ve gone totally different. There’d be pride issues, and they would’ve beaten me up. See how heroic I am?”

“I think you’re selling yourself short. If that’s true, then how come more girls don’t go on Liv Fleming–style anti-bully rampages? Because they’re scared. I’d be scared, too. That’s why you’re my hero, and that’s my final word on the subject.”

Bruno crossed his arms and lifted his chin in defiance. Liv rolled her eyes, but there was a squirming in her stomach she mistook for

dread before identifying it as dread's opposite. Her relationship with Doug had been soaked in stigma for so long that she couldn't trust any positive feelings anywhere near it. She stared down at the list of Bruno's sisters in a desperate hunt for a topic change.

"You were saying hi to Mrs. Meachum, huh? Really getting a head start on the brownnosing."

"Hardy-har. I actually happen to like teachers. Plus, I'm not above a little brownnosing. They're casting for *Oliver!* next week, and if I don't get a lead, these hallways are going to be ringing with my sobs. With my beautifully musical, pitch-perfect sobs."

A funny thing to say, but Liv didn't hear it. At the word *Oliver!*, it was like coal dust had been poured over her head. Her vision went dark, her brain darker. The word sat on the desk before her like a scorched, unidentifiable, yet disgusting object, something vaguely threatening and not definitively dead. She wanted to push her desk away in hopes that the object would drop to the floor and she could ignore it like a dead roach.

Bruno had quit talking. He ducked his head into her field of vision.

"Liv?"

She blinked, barely seeing him, then crawled her eyes through the room of oblivious natterers to the teacher standing before her stupid shelf of dolls. Mrs. Meachum might be handling the musical side of the play, but it was Baldwin who selected the productions, cast them, and directed them. Liv grit her teeth and let the feelings seep in.

"That *bitch*."

"Baldwin?" Bruno shrugged. "This assignment isn't *that* bad."

Only this boy's recent arrival made him any less ignorant than anyone else. *Oliver!* was intimately linked to Mr. Fleming's downfall. It had been his final production, the one that had proven to everyone that he had no place in civilized society. A mere five plays had passed in the interim, and Baldwin thought that was long enough to bring *Oliver!* back?

Ten minutes later, Liv's entire body quaked with a level of anger she could barely rein in. There was no need for Baldwin to fish around for volunteers to go first. Liv raised her hand and stood, to the surprise of Bruno, who, by his big grin, had clearly expected to launch their joint interview. Liv ignored him; she ignored the other students; she recalled lessons of speech classes past and focused on her audience, which numbered one: Ms. Baldwin.

"My name is Liv Fleming," she said in a trembling voice, "and the fact that you're doing *Oliver!* this year makes me sick. You don't have any sensitivity at all. You're a terrible, terrible person. I hope you go to hell."

6 .

CROSS-COUNTRY PRACTICE WAS JUST

what she needed, though, sadly, the phrase *cross-country* was a misnomer. When the two hours of jogging around the park were up, Liv found herself still stuck in Bloughton, Iowa, with little rage burned off. It was at least more time with her friends. Monica, Krista, Darla, Laurie, Amber—the team was where she had managed, after her dad’s downfall, to find friends, and although there wasn’t much to be done in practice beyond gasp and sweat and shoot pretend bazookas at Coach Carney, it was the best part of Liv’s day, with endorphins eclipsing all emotion.

She fell into the station wagon, her soggy shirt and shorts gluing to the seat plastic, and did the twenty-minute drive home with only slight attention given to stop signs and red lights. Only when the white gravel cloud of Custer Road swallowed the world did she feel invisible and safe.

John didn't lift his chin from the steps when she reached them. He rolled his brown eyes upward as if to warn her that there was nothing inside the house any better than what was outside.

Liv assumed that floors of beer cans and tabletops of bottles were more typical signs of insobriety, but Aggie Fleming's intoxication was signaled by tidiness. Her poison was wine, and her defense was to dress it up as something classy. You saw it on TV all the time. Girlfriends at a brunch, laughing over sauvignon blanc. Women in movies, luxuriating in bubble baths while candlelight made their Bordeaux twinkle. Aggie dressed to drink, in skirts, blouses, and pantsuits as if she were about to leave for a function, and to perpetuate the illusion, she neatened up before getting down to business.

The living room, then, was the antithesis of the jungled yard, as surface-clean as a cheap motel. Sofa cushions were equilaterally placed, magazines squared away in racks, tables cleared of detritus, and a single wineglass was centered upon a glass coaster. Aggie had missed only one spot, in the corner, an anthill of plaster dust from the crumbling ceiling. She was facing away as Liv approached, high-heeled shoe bobbing amiably over a knee.

"First day of school," Aggie sang.

She uncrossed her legs to look over her shoulder.

"How's my girl."

Her lips were too numb to make it a question.

Liv tried to will her sadness into anger. It would be easier. Aggie Fleming's life had been ruined by her husband's public fall from grace. The secretarial job at Sookie's she'd been on pace to parlay into marketing director had turned into an abrupt layoff; now she

shopped there in disgrace, because where else was there to shop? She had two jobs these days, answering phones at the vet clinic by day and waiting tables at a steakhouse by night. Right now she was between the two. She used a pinkie to dab wine from her lip, and Liv suffered a contraction of sympathy. Why remove a single drop? She was afloat in it.

“They’re doing *Oliver!*,” Liv said. “The school.”

“Hmm? Dickens?”

“No. Yes. The play.”

“Baby, would you mind fetching me a paper towel? I think this glass has a crack.”

Of course it had a crack—the constant picking up, setting down. Liv dropped her bag onto the dining room table hard enough to split it, ripped off a towel, and handed it over. Her mom took it, folded it daintily, and blotted at the black hose under her skirt. Liv didn’t see wine stains, unless you counted the permanent ones on her mom’s fingers. Liv noted the current bottle (a third full) as well as the previous bottle (empty) snuggled neatly alongside the sofa, though not quite neatly enough to disappear.

“When’s your shift?”

“Ugh, you’re such an adult. People like a waitress a little loose.”

“Mom. I hope you don’t say that in public.”

“I don’t mean it in a vulgar way. Just . . . relaxed. Prepared for witty repartee.”

“I also don’t like you driving like this.”

Aggie lofted her wineglass imperially in her left hand and with her right tugged Liv’s wrist. Liv resisted.

“Sit with your old momma.”

“I’m sweaty.”

Her mom pouted and tugged. Liv inhaled, said nothing, and let herself be pulled down. The glass of wine sloshed, but Aggie was a virtuoso of liquid counterbalance. She sipped, then leaned into her daughter, nuzzling Liv’s neck. Liv closed her eyes, anything to be able to melt into her mom’s embrace.

Aggie wrapped her arm around Liv’s waist.

“You’re so strong,” Aggie sighed. “Feel those muscles. You’ve got such a nice body.”

“I feel like that’s gross, Mom.”

“Shush. I’ve been holding you since you were itty-bitty.”

Liv, though, was holding her mother. How could Aggie not notice that? Aggie’s free fingers ran through her daughter’s hair, her long nails slicing through damp strands and sliding along the sweaty scalp. It did seem motherly, Liv had to admit, this acceptance of her child’s dirtiness. Curled up against Liv, nearly in her lap, her mother looked tiny. The years revealed by the corners of her eyes and the backs of her arms only made her smallness more heartbreaking.

“I’d hold you,” Aggie cooed, “while your daddy read you poetry. He wanted to turn you into a little . . . what’s her name. Sophia someone. Sophie. Sylvia. Plath.”

“Sylvia Plath killed herself,” Liv said.

“Well, I’m sure he didn’t want *that*. He wanted the whole town strolling around being all poetic all the time. He had this whole fantasy.”

“Mom, I know. *Resurrection Update*, remember?”

“Oh mercy. If I never see another book-shaped package, it’ll be too soon.”

Lee Fleming’s poetry push had solidified around the hardscrabble collection of poems by James Galvin, who scowled from the back cover in an old denim shirt, as if furious about being photographed. Lee had won some victories in broadening the curriculum—wedging Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* into the mix of dead white guys, carving out a whole week for Philip K. Dick—but no one understood why you’d dump Frost and Thoreau for a living poet, despite Lee’s insistence that Galvin being alive was half the point, not to mention his Iowa connection. When the school had balked at the purchase order, Lee bought thirty-five copies out of his own pocket, scouring the Internet for used paperbacks and, when they ran out, paying full retail price.

“He always wanted me to pick my favorite poem from the book,” Liv said.

“Me too. I’d make it up. ‘The seventh one.’ Something like that.”

“I always chose ‘Sapphic Suicide Note,’” Liv said.

“Blarg. Suicide again. That’s poets for you.”

Liv shrugged against her mother’s warmth. “I only liked it because it was short.”

Aggie snapped her fingers in a pretty funny pantomime of a slam-poetry fan. She *was* loose. Liv could imagine her being plenty charming before steakhouse patrons, and wasn’t loose and charming better than what she’d been during her husband’s final year—tense, helpless, sick with worry?

“Recite!” Aggie cried. “Recite!”

Liv could have. Seeking a leg up on future classmates, she’d

cracked *Resurrection Update* as a freshman. At seven words, “Sapphic Suicide Note” was the first—and only—poem in the book she’d read, one so short she’d unwittingly memorized it while trying to figure out how someone got paid for putting a mere seven words on a page.

day out

no worldly joy

italics mine

The whole thing puzzled her, though it was the last two words that most baffled. When she’d asked her dad what they meant, he’d explained that “italics mine” was a phrase writers used when adding their own italicized emphasis to a quoted source. Fine, but there weren’t any italics in “Sapphic Suicide Note.”

“Dad always said poetry was full of secrets,” Liv sighed into her mom’s hair.

“I’m sorry, baby,” Aggie said.

Liv didn’t think Aggie was apologizing for the thirty-five copies of *Resurrection Update* missing from Baldwin’s shelf.

“It’s okay,” Liv replied.

“One day it’ll be better. You’ll see. The house and the yard. The bills. Somehow they all got lost, but we’re going to find them. They’re around here. I’ll neaten up the place. We’ll find them. My phone has a flashlight. Does yours, baby?”

Liv’s eyes swam in tears.

“Mm-hm,” she said.

“Good.” Her mother yawned. “Now what’s all this about Charles

Dickens? *A Christmas Carol*. Tiny Tim. I remember George C. Scott as Scrooge. He flew through the night with a ghost. Doesn't that sound lovely?"

Liv looked from the pile of ceiling plaster to the ruptured ceiling above it, wondering if the fracture was big enough to permit her passage when, at night, a certain ghost in a certain memory tried to pull her through it.

"*Oliver Twist*," she said.

"Your school is doing the play, hm?"

"The musical. The one Dad did."

"That's odd."

Liv sniffled hard, hoping the sharp inhale would spark her dampened rage. "How can they do that?" she pleaded. "It's only been two years."

"Has it been that long? Seems like"—Aggie clicked her tongue—"nothing."

"Everyone will start talking about it again. The whole thing."

"Nobody saw that show, baby. It was a . . . what do you call it?"

"Dress rehearsal. I know. But everyone heard about it. They still talk about it. Maybe you don't hear about it, but I sure do." Liv listened for any change in her mother's breathing. "Doesn't this make you mad?"

"I'm trying to be, baby. It's just . . . I'm so. I'm so. The wine, I guess."

"I mean, Ms. Baldwin—how could she? She's a bitch. Isn't she?"

Her mother yawned into Liv's neck. "That's right, baby."

"With me still in school? She couldn't wait one more year?"

“Shh, baby.”

“They won’t let it die. They won’t let *him* die.”

“We don’t own the play, baby. We don’t own people. We don’t own anything. It’s all just—poof. Dandelions in the breeze.”

Hot sadness filled Liv’s chest and burned to be cried out. Why was it only when her mother was drunk that she uttered words of such perfect, inadvertent beauty? Liv raised her hand, placed it on the back of her mother’s head, and pet it. The hair was brittle and poorly dyed, but still pretty. Liv’s hand, meanwhile, was not. Her nail polish was chipped to hell and her knuckles scabbed. She watched the scabs dive into her mother’s hair, then resurface, then dive, and it felt like her life.