

THE GIRL  
I USED  
TO BE





THE GIRL  
I USED  
TO BE

APRIL HENRY

*Christy Ottaviano Books*

HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY • NEW YORK

Henry Holt and Company, LLC  
*Publishers since 1866*  
175 Fifth Avenue  
New York, New York 10010  
fiercereads.com

Henry Holt® is a registered trademark of Henry Holt and Company, LLC.  
Copyright © 2016 by April Henry  
All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.  
ISBN 978-1-62779-332-2

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 e-mail at [MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com](mailto:MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com).

First Edition—2016

Printed in the United States of America by R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company,  
Harrisonburg, Virginia

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

This book is for my mom, who always said I would write my best book because of grief. I read the first few chapters to her when she was in hospice. For many years, my mom was the only person who read what I wrote. I am still striving to be the woman she was: kind, spontaneous, funny, and helpful.

The background of the page is a grayscale image of water ripples, with concentric circles of varying sizes and densities, creating a textured, organic pattern. The ripples are most prominent in the upper half of the page, fading into a plain white background towards the bottom.

## CHAPTER 1

# SCATTER MY BONES

**T**HE ONLY SOUND I CAN HEAR IS MY OWN panicked breathing. I'm running flat out through the forest. Then my toe catches a root, and suddenly I'm flying.

Until I'm not. I come down hard. With my hands cuffed in front of me, I can't even really break my fall. Despite the plastic boot on my left leg, I'm up again in a crazy scrambling second, spitting out dirt and pine needles as I start sprinting again.

Running like my life depends on it. Because it does.

Three weeks ago, I was living in Portland. Working in a supermarket deli. Slicing turkey breast and handing out cheese samples on toothpicks.

Now I'm hurtling through the Southern Oregon woods, being chased by a killer. And no one knows I'm here.

Because of the handcuffs, I can't pump my fists. Instead, I have to swing them in tandem. Trying to avoid

another fall, I lift my knees higher as the ground rises. I can't hear my pursuer, just my own panting breath.

If I don't come back, will Duncan ever know what happened to me? These woods can hide things for years. Will animals scatter my bones, plants twine around my remains?

When I reach the top of the hill, I don't slow down. Instead, I try to lengthen my stride. It's impossible to maintain a rhythm. I leap over a log, splash through the silver thread of a creek. My mouth is so dry. It tastes of dirt and the bitterness of fear.

A stellar jay startles up from a branch, squawking. If only I could take wing and fly. But I'm stuck here on earth, legs churning, staggering over this uneven ground.

I can't stop or I'll die.

The reality is that I'm probably going to die anyway. And if that's so, I'm going to go down fighting.

CHAPTER 2  
THREE WEEKS EARLIER

# THE KALEIDOSCOPE SHIFTS

IT BEGINS WITH A NAME I HAVEN'T HEARD IN years. Except in my dreams.

“Ariel? Ariel Benson?”

I freeze.

Ten seconds ago, someone knocked on my apartment door. Through the peephole, I saw two men, one with a white band for a collar. I didn't feel like talking to missionaries, with their brochures printed on limp paper, so I turned away.

But then they said my name. My old name.

Now I open the door a few inches. They're in their midthirties. About the right age to be my dad. A bubble expands in my chest.

“Ariel Benson?” the man in the rumpled suit repeats, his pale eyes locking onto mine. Nothing about him is familiar.

I nod. When I try to swallow, my tongue is a piece of leather.

“I'm Detective Campbell. And this is Chaplain Farben.



We're with the Portland police, but we're here on behalf of the Medford police." Medford is more than four hours away. It's where I was born. "Can we come in?"

Cops. The kaleidoscope shifts. Should I be disappointed—or relieved? I step back, hoping they don't notice the open box of Lucky Charms on the scarred coffee table.

They take the blue futon couch. I sit on the green striped chair I found on the side of the road two months ago. Since they're cops, I know what they must be here to tell me. And it's not that one of them is my father. "So you found my dad?"

All these years, I've imagined where he might have run to. Mexico? Cambodia? Venezuela? Some place where he could forget what he did. But the law must have finally caught up with him.

The detective's brow furrows. "Has someone been in contact with you?"

I've made sure no one knows the truth about who I am. Who I come from. "Just guessing." I shrug, like I don't care. "Why else would two cops be here?"

"Is there someone you would want us to call, Ariel?" the chaplain asks. He has a round, pale face, like the moon. "Someone you'd like to have with you?"

I wish they would just cut to the chase. "I'm an emancipated minor." I don't need an adult here. According to the law, I *am* an adult, even though I only just turned seventeen. "So where did you find him?"

The detective pulls out a notebook and flips to the top page. "It was actually a woman walking her dog. In the

woods about a mile from where your mother's body was found."

At first, I imagine my dad as some crazy, long-haired guy living off the grid, but then I realize they're not talking about him living in a cabin. The pieces shift and fall again.

They're talking about a body.

The world slows down. "You mean he's dead? My father's dead?"

Startled, the two men exchange a glance.

I press my hand to my mouth, lifting it long enough to say, "Can you start from the beginning, please?"

The detective sucks in a breath. "You're Ariel Benson, right?"

It's simpler just to agree. "Right." The adoption eight years ago didn't work out, but I kept the name. Olivia Reinhart. I left Ariel Benson behind.

"And your mother was Naomi Benson. And your father was Terry Weeks." The detective watches me carefully. "Is that right?"

I nod, still trying to get used to the repetition of the word *was*.

"Nearly fourteen years ago, your mother's body was found in the forest in southern Oregon."

"Right. My dad killed her and then drove up here. Along the way, he dropped me off at the Salem Walmart. He parked at the airport and then took off." Wiped his truck clean, left it in the long-term lot, and vanished. This was before September 11, when it was a lot easier to just fly away without leaving a record of where you went. Leaving

behind your murdered girlfriend and your three-year-old daughter. “So I don’t understand. How could his body be in the forest?”

“Not his whole body,” the detective corrects me. “So far, all the Medford police have is his jawbone. It was found about a month ago, but there weren’t enough teeth left to match dental records. They just got the DNA results back.”

Even though I’m sitting down, the floor feels far away.

The chaplain leans forward. “Ariel, what you said was the working theory the Medford police have had all these years. But the discovery of your father’s remains changes that. They now think he was murdered, probably at the same time as your mother, and by the same person.”

I try to take it in. My father’s not a killer. He’s not in some foreign country. He’s not going to show up at my door to see how I turned out.

He’s been dead for nearly fourteen years.

I snatch at one of the dozens of thoughts whirling through my brain. “But you said it”—I’m not going to say *jawbone*, I’m *not*—“was a mile from where my mom was found. Why weren’t they found together?”

The detective shrugs. “It’s hard to know. Your mother’s body wasn’t found for, what”—he looks down at his notebook and back up at me—“three weeks? Animal predation could have disturbed the remains. The killer could have moved one of the bodies. Maybe one of your parents tried to run. The Medford police don’t even know how your father was killed, because they only have the jawbone.”

All my life, I’ve known what I am. The daughter of

a victim and a killer. When I looked in the mirror, sometimes I thought I could see them both—the cowering and the rage.

Part of my dad was in me, and that meant I could grow up to be like him. Every time I lost my temper, I felt it pulse deep inside. The knowledge that I could do something as crazy as he did, stab someone I was supposed to love and leave them with only the cold stars as witnesses.

But now what am I? What was my father?

And there's something else.

If my dad didn't kill my mom, if his body has always been in the forest—then who drove me to the Walmart three hours away?

I imagine the three-year-old me. I've thought about that girl so much, what she might have seen, what she knew, what it was like being in that truck with her dad after he killed her mother.

I don't remember ever being that girl. Not what happened that day or before. Is not remembering a gift or a curse?

And now everything has been turned on its head.

"Too bad you were too young to remember anything." The detective meets my eyes. His own are a washed blue. "Although that's probably what saved you. Because the Medford police believe it must have been your parents' killer who took you to the Walmart."

The background of the page is a grayscale image of water ripples, with concentric circles of varying sizes and intensities, creating a textured, organic pattern.

## CHAPTER 3

# TWISTED LOVE

THE ROOM IS SPINNING. I CLOSE MY EYES. When everyone thought my dad had killed my mom, it made sense that he hadn't killed me. I was his daughter, his own blood.

"But why not?" I manage to ask. "If the killer had already murdered my parents, why didn't he kill me?"

The detective straightens up. "You just said 'he.'" He and the chaplain watch me closely.

"Yeah? So?"

"Does that mean you remember that the killer was a man? The police down in Medford want to know if you have any memories of what happened. Especially in light of this new evidence."

"I don't remember anything. It just seems likely it was a man, that's all. What woman would stab another woman nineteen times?" I can't imagine even stabbing someone once. In biology class last year, we had to cut an earthworm in half and then sew it back together. I'll never

forget the way the worm's skin resisted and finally gave way with a pop.

Detective Campbell shrugs. "You'd be surprised. It could have been a woman. Maybe not a stranger, not that many times, but a woman who knew your mom and hated her. Or who panicked and felt like she had to make sure your mom was dead." The chaplain pulls a face at the bluntness, but the detective doesn't stop. "You're right, though. In cases like this, it's more than likely a male perpetrator. As to why he—or maybe she—didn't kill you, he probably figured you were too young to say what you had seen. Or he knew you, and that held him back. Or he felt wrong killing a child. Some killers target specific victims but would never hurt someone who doesn't meet that profile."

"Could it have been a stranger?" I ask. "Some crazy guy they just met in the woods?"

"There are two reasons to kill someone you don't know," Detective Campbell says. "The primary one is because they have something you want, and you do what you need to do to take it from them. Even murder." His voice is matter-of-fact.

I can't imagine being that cold. "So someone might have killed my parents so they could steal from them?"

"But there's one problem with that scenario. What would they have stolen?" He lifts his empty hands. "From what the Medford police told us, your parents didn't have much money. And the killer didn't do it for your dad's truck, because it was left at the airport. And they didn't do it for you, because they left you at the Walmart. So stealing as a motive doesn't seem likely."

I nod, my thoughts still spinning.

“But some people kill because they like killing. And in those cases, the murder isn’t something that just happens. It’s what you want in the first place. It’s what you live for.”

The way he says *you* creeps me out, as if he thinks any of us could be a person with twisted desires.

“Was my mom alive the whole time?” I’ve wondered that for years.

“There was some decomposition”—Chaplain Farben clears his throat as if warning Detective Campbell not to get too graphic, but he continues—“so they couldn’t say for sure. She could have been dead for some of it. They do know she fought back. Some of those wounds were defensive cuts to her forearms and hands.” He raises his hands over his head as if trying to shield himself. “And who knows? There’s nothing to say the killer didn’t stab your father to death, too. We don’t have enough of his body to know.”

His answer just raises another question. “Then why didn’t animals get my mom?”

“The killer wrapped her in a tarp.”

I shiver. “Why would they do that?”

“It’s not uncommon for the killer to cover the victim afterward. They feel guilty about what they’ve done. That’s one reason the Medford police thought your dad did it. That and the overkill.”

“Overkill?”

“If your goal is to kill someone, you don’t need to stab them so many times. Nineteen times tells me there was some type of passion involved. Either extreme anger or

someone who loved to kill or who felt some kind of twisted love for your mom. The Medford police weren't wrong to think it was your dad. The first person I would have looked at would be a boyfriend or a husband. A lover."

I shiver. It's crazy to think someone you once loved, who once loved you, could stab you and stab you and keep stabbing you. Even after you were dead.



## CHAPTER 4

# UNSOLVED MYSTERIES

THE COPS FINALLY LEAVE.

I don't have any pictures of my parents. When you're in the system, you don't have much that's yours. Instead of a suitcase, it's a garbage bag or a cardboard box. Every time you get taken to a new place, things get lost or stolen.

But I know where I can see my mom and dad.

I open my old laptop and go to YouTube. Nearly fourteen years ago, my family was featured three times on *America's Most Wanted*. Since then, people have sliced and diced the old shows and put the segments on YouTube. Sometimes it's just an off-center video by someone who filmed their TV set.

The first is from about a week after my family went missing. I've seen the host, John Walsh, on TV. Now he has gray hair, but in this video, it's shiny black. Looking serious, he talks fast.

"Southern Oregon's Cascade Range is a place where people go to get away from it all. This peaceful mountain

setting is also the last known destination for a missing family who went looking for a Christmas tree and never came back.”

When this episode aired, I had already been found and was in foster care. No one realized that a missing family was related to one little girl found three hours away, one who answered questions with a blank stare.

“On December sixth,” Walsh says, “Terry Weeks and Naomi Benson told friends they planned to take their three-year-old daughter, Ariel, to look for a Christmas tree. They have not been seen since, and it’s unknown if they even made it to their planned destination. Their vehicle has not been located by Forest Service personnel or by a helicopter Terry Weeks’s father hired.”

Next on-screen is Jack Weeks. My grandfather. When I was eleven, my caseworker told me he had died. Since I didn’t have any memories of him, it didn’t mean much. He may have loved his son enough to hire a helicopter, but that love hadn’t extended to giving me a home when I was all alone.

On YouTube he looks rugged and tanned, like he’ll live forever. He says, “If they made it to the woods, why haven’t we found Terry’s truck? Terry’s an experienced outdoorsman. He and Naomi have a child with them. They wouldn’t have gone far from a road. Something must have happened before they even got there.”

The camera cuts back to Walsh in the studio. “Terry Weeks is twenty-one. Naomi Benson is twenty. And little Ariel Benson is just three. Look closely at their photos and that of this Dodge truck, which is similar to the truck Terry Weeks drove.”

The screen shows an orange pickup with the license plate blurred out. And then there's a photo of the three of us.

I hit Pause. We are at the beach, on what must have been one of those rare warm days at the Oregon coast. I'm on my mom's lap. I don't remember being blond, but I used to be. My mom's wavy brown hair falls past her shoulders. She has high cheekbones, dark eyebrows, and eyes that slant down at the corners. If my computer was a mirror, I'd see something similar, only my nose doesn't turn up. It's long and straight, like my dad's, and I have his strong chin.

My dad's dark blond hair is a little too long. Shirtless, he sits on the blanket next to my mom, with one arm slung around her waist. The fingers of his other hand curl around my small shoulder.

When I first found this photo online, it made me shudder. My father's hands looked possessive, like he could dictate anything, including whether we lived or died.

The photo hasn't changed, but I have. My chest hurts.

Now I see nothing but love, or an attempt at love, in the way he touches us. He was trying to do the right things: act like a family, pose for a vacation photo, search for a Christmas tree in a forest. I don't know if he did it for me, my mom, or himself, but still, he tried. I do know he was raised by his dad after his mom died, just like my mom was raised by her mom after her parents divorced. Neither of them really knowing how to make a whole family.

I look at their faces and wonder: Did one of them have to watch the other die? My head fills with water.

I click to resume the clip. Walsh says, “Family members say it’s totally out of character for Weeks and Benson to just disappear. So please, if you know anything, call 1-800-CRIMETV.”

A day after the show aired, the foster mom took me to a doctor for a scratch on my face that had become infected. The nurse thought I looked familiar. The police asked my grandmother to drive up, and she identified me.

Which is about the point where the second *America’s Most Wanted* picks up.

Walsh says, “When we showed you the photo of Terry Weeks, Naomi Benson, and their daughter, Ariel, you helped us locate the missing little girl. She was found at a Walmart three hours north of where authorities were looking for her family. Little Ariel was hungry and dirty, and her face was scratched. And her parents were nowhere to be found.” He raises his eyebrows. “For now, Ariel is living with her grandmother.”

The camera cuts away to a face I do remember: Grandma. Wearing a purple sweatshirt, she says to the camera, “When I walked into the room, Ariel held her arms out and said ‘Grandma’ and ran to me. I’ve had her ever since.”

“Ever since” turned out to be four years. Then Grandma had a heart attack and died. And I went back into foster care, more or less for good.

“Ariel used to be such a lively little thing, but now she doesn’t seem happy.” Grandma’s fingers twist together. “We’ve tried asking her where Naomi and Terry are, but all she’s ever said is, ‘Mommy’s dancing.’”

On the screen, a three-year-old me holds out a stuffed

purple frog to a framed photo of my mom. Grandma tells Walsh that I like to share things with my mom.

Although I don't remember being filmed, sometimes I think maybe I do have some memories of my parents. I don't know if they're real. They've been handled and stretched and frayed until now they're memories of memories of memories. A man peeling me an apple. And my mother brushing my hair while we watched *SpongeBob SquarePants*. At least I think it was her. Just the sensation of it. So soothing. Feeling loved and safe and cared for.

I haven't felt like that since Grandma died.

On my computer, Grandma sighs. "I think Ariel knows something. She's withdrawn. Her personality definitely isn't the same."

The final episode was filmed after my mom's body was found, three weeks after my parents disappeared. There are quick shots of snowy woods, sniffing bloodhounds, a man waving a metal detector over the snow. Walsh speaks as the screen cuts to men carrying a long, black-wrapped bundle to an ambulance waiting with its lights off.

"This week, some of the questions surrounding the little girl mysteriously abandoned at a Walmart were tragically answered when grouse hunters found the body of her mother, Naomi Benson, in the Oregon forest. She had been stabbed to death. Terry Weeks and his truck have not been located. While there are rumors the two had a rocky relationship, for now Naomi's death and Terry's disappearance remain a mystery, a secret held close by the wilderness. Once again, America, we need your help."

It would be several more weeks before my dad's truck

was found hundreds of miles away, in the Portland airport's long-term parking lot.

Walsh's voice is a mix of optimism and determination. "There's not much to go on, but together we can solve this case. The crucial time is December sixth. If you were in the southern Oregon Cascades that day, or at the Salem Walmart, or if you saw any of these people or this truck, the police need to know. Naomi Benson deserves justice. You could be the one to bring it to her."

But it wasn't just my mother who needed justice. My dad did, too. Someone murdered both of them and left their families to wonder and worry. In my dad's case, for years.

I uncurl my fists. My fingernails have left red half-moons in my palms.

On the *Medford Mail Tribune* website, I skim the main story, headlined "Formerly Thought Killer, Man Now Considered Victim."

. . . Medford Chief of Police Stephen Spaulding said, "I remember that case well. I was a search-and-rescue volunteer, and after Naomi was found, we searched those woods for evidence, but we didn't find anything useful." He added that he hoped the discovery of Terry Weeks's remains will help jump-start the case, although the passage of time and the lack of evidence might make it difficult to solve.

What about evidence in people's memories, the way Walsh talked about? Someone has to know—or have guessed—what happened that day.

“For the past fourteen years, a cloud has hung over my brother,” said Terry Weeks’s sister, Carly Weeks-Taylor. “I know everyone thought that Terry was a killer, that he was living in another country, that he just abandoned his daughter. I wish our dad were alive to know the truth.”

Weeks’s sister said a service is planned for 2 PM on Saturday at the Perl Funeral Home, and she urges anyone with memories or photos of Weeks to bring them to share. “At least now we can finally grieve,” she said.

I don’t have to work on Saturday. I could drive down.

But it would be stupid to go. It’s not like my dad will be there. Chances are, even his jawbone won’t be. It’s probably still police property.

The background of the page is a grayscale image of water ripples, with concentric circles and smaller, more irregular patterns, creating a textured, organic feel.

## CHAPTER 5

# JUST TRYING TO GET HOME

"REGULAR FILL, PLEASE," I TELL THE GAS station guy. How much is it going to cost to drive there and back, plus get a hotel? Maybe I'll just come home after the funeral. If I get too tired, I can lock my doors and sleep in a rest area.

In the backseat is a duffel bag with my laptop, a book, and a few clothes. Not much, but it nearly cleaned out my closet. What do you wear to a funeral? In the movies, it's a black dress, stockings, pumps. Sometimes a hat with a veil. I don't have a black dress or a fancy hat. I brought a pair of black work pants and a plain black T-shirt, and they'll have to do.

I can't remember if I went to my mom's funeral or what I wore to my grandmother's. I was seven when Grandma died, old enough to know she was in the long wooden box. Too old to hide underneath a pew, crying, but that's what I did. People stood in the back, arguing. About me. I put my hands over my ears, but I still



saw lips curl back, heard the hiss of words, saw fingers point in my direction.

Huddled miserably underneath that pew, I knew what the arguing was about. No one wanted me. Me with my nightmares and my bad parents, one dead and one on the run.

The gas guy interrupts my thoughts with a total that makes me flinch. After I leave, I try not to hear the squeal that happens when I make a sharp right turn. My Mazda 323 is three years older than I am. The color is “champagne beige,” but it’s really just tan. I got the car off Craigslist. Since I can’t afford to fix anything, I keep the stereo turned up and pretend I don’t hear bad noises. I get on the freeway and start heading south.

After Grandma died, I was in foster care, first with one family and then another. They’ve all blurred together. Was the first family the one with three dogs? The one with four sets of bunk beds? The one where the parents got a divorce?

Then when I was eight, I was told I was getting a forever family.

Only it wasn’t really a family. Just a woman, Tamsin Reinhart, who had visited a few times. She was an orthopedic surgeon in Portland. She was in her forties and had never been married. Maybe at some point she could have had a baby of her own, but Tamsin was all about efficiency. Adopting an older kid meant she could skip diapers and toilet training and the terrible twos. An eight-year-old, she must have figured, already knew how to dress herself and entertain herself and do pretty much what she was told. Tamsin—she wanted me to call her Mom, but I never

did—bought us matching mother-daughter dresses to wear to church the first Sunday after the adoption. Pale green with little yellow flowers, the dresses swirled around our ankles when we walked. She held my hand, even though I tried to pull away, and afterward everyone came up to compliment us.

But I missed Medford. I missed my friends. I missed my school. I still missed my grandmother, with her soft body and unrestrained laugh. Every Halloween she dressed like a witch, ratted up her hair, and took out her top teeth. Tamsin was stiff and careful and never less than perfectly dressed. I had nightmares nearly every night—I still have them—and Tamsin didn't know how to deal with my screaming as I fought off invisible monsters.

And I missed my name. My real name. Ariel Benson. When she adopted me, Tamsin had it changed to Olivia Reinhart. *Reinhart* so we would have the same last name, like a real mother and daughter. And *Olivia* because she thought Ariel sounded tacky, like the mermaid in the Disney movie.

It's true. I remember Grandma talking about it. My mom named me after a cartoon movie character.

At Tamsin's, I was lonely and scared, but determined not to show it. And I was angry, too, at all the changes everyone said were for my benefit. Looking back, I don't think anyone prepared Tamsin for how I would test her. That first week, she gave me a book she'd loved when she was a girl, *Black Beauty*, and I "accidentally" spilled water on it. I spit out the tasteless pale yellow macaroni and cheese she made. I'd never had homemade before. And

every day, I told her I wanted to go back to my old foster family, where there weren't any rules about bedtime or watching TV or not eating before dinner.

I didn't trust that it was real. So I pushed Tamsin away. And it worked.

Within three months, I was back in the foster system. Tamsin cried when the grim-faced social worker drove up to the house, but still, she let me go. When I was younger, I told myself that it was proof she hadn't really loved me. Maybe the truth was it could have worked out if both of us hadn't been so hurt or if we had given it more time.

I thought if Tamsin gave me back, I could return to my old life. But I didn't get anything back, not even my old name. The social worker said it would be too confusing to change, since they had decided I should stay in the same Portland school Tamsin had enrolled me in.

The freeway sign reads SALEM NEXT 3 EXITS. An hour has slipped by. It's only nine, and the funeral's not until two. I haven't been back to the Salem Walmart since I was found there nearly fourteen years ago. Maybe going in will help me remember what happened.

Inside, it's crammed with people and TVs, shoes and ketchup, toilet paper and tubs of blue cotton candy. I was found curled up underneath a fake Christmas tree, but since it's August, the seasonal display's theme is back-to-school. The crayons and pink erasers feel full of promise. Every time I started at a new school, I told myself things would be different. This time I would have tons of friends. This time I would raise my hand. This time math would make sense.

This Walmart just seems exactly like the Portland

Walmart I've been to a half dozen times. I get down on one knee, like I'm going to tie one of my black Vans, but really it's so I'm about the same height as a little kid. I squint. Does any of it feel familiar? The shelves looming overhead, the bright lights?

And there's a worker in this row now, a middle-aged guy in a red vest, filling a display with packages of yellow pencils but looking at me. Does he think I'm a shoplifter?

I guess my missing memories won't be restored like a puzzle piece snapping into place. I walk out empty-handed and get back in the car.

The farther south I go, the bluer the sky gets. The clouds thin and disappear. The day heats up, so I roll down my window. I drive through long miles of evergreens, forests that stretch to the horizon.

I find a radio station playing old music from the nineties. In a couple of years, I'll be as old as my parents were when they died. It's as if they're stuck in amber, like the scorpion in a necklace I once saw at Goodwill. They'll forever be wearing out-of-date clothes and smiling with slightly crooked teeth they couldn't afford to get fixed.

I've got those same teeth. Foster care doesn't pay for braces.

At the rest area outside Roseburg, a dark-haired girl sits cross-legged in front of the cinder-block restroom, her head tipped back against the wall, her eyes closed. Her sign reads JUST TRYING TO GET HOME. As I leave, I put a dollar bill in her white paper cup, but she doesn't stir.

Finally, I'm through the mountains and driving down into the Rogue River valley. It's more a feeling than a memory, but these tawny, folded hills, like a golden

blanket pushed down to the foot of a giant's bed, are so familiar.

It's only four miles to Medford, and I've still got nearly two hours before the funeral. There's one other place I want to go.

My grandmother's house. My house, really, or it will be when I turn eighteen. Until then, I get the rental income. At least I used to, until three months ago, when the last tenant left.

I take the exit and follow the directions. And there's the house, familiar and not. Tiny and square, gray, with peeling white shutters that were probably last painted long before Grandma died.

I park next to a huge yucca bush with sword-shaped leaves. A sign stuck in the tall grass reads FOR RENT BY LEE REALTY.

I'm looking through the front window at a worn gold couch next to a battered coffee table, when I hear a voice behind me.

"I know who you must be."