

**Tell Me
Something
Good**



HARPER
COURT STEVENS



HARPER MUSE

Tell Me Something Good

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
[[CIP TO COME]]

Printed in the United States of America

\$PrintCode

A Note from the Author

I WAS A FRESHMAN IN college when a shooting at Heath High School forever changed the way I thought about gun violence in public spaces. *Tell Me Something Good* is not an active shooter narrative but it does begin with a threat of public violence. The story camera stays on the character attempting to stop a weapons auction that will arm the potential shooter. Public violence of any type should be sensitive and heartbreaking to all, but for those of you for whom this hits too close to home, please protect your mental health.

Prologue

HERE IS A NAME FROM a potential future: Corey William Turrent.

In one arrangement of time, Corey will take an assault rifle from his father's gun case. He will hide the weapon under his jacket. He will walk the three sweltering blocks from his home in Buckman, New Jersey, to Roseville Elementary. Once he's through the lobby doors, he will open fire.

If this future comes to fruition, Corey William Turrent will kill seventeen students and four teachers.

The thing that hangs between this atrocity and a safe and lovely day for Roseville Elementary is what occurs at the Lodges Royale in Bent Tree, Kentucky, many years before.

Here is also where I introduce you to Anna Ryder, and we find out which future is ours.

CHAPTER 1

ANNA RYDER'S NEED FOR A new job starts in a doctor's office.

Cancer sucks. Everyone knows that. And because the body tells on itself, Anna and her mother, Starr, feel the diagnosis coming before it comes in earnest. In the week before the appointment, they downplay the threat. They won't borrow trouble until the doctor uses the C word. The weight loss might be something simple: a vitamin deficiency, a thyroid problem. Whatever it is, it's fixable.

That is the lie you tell yourself when you love someone.

When they are alone, their fears run them into the ground. Each imagines what will happen if the worst comes for Starr and neither of them can breathe. The mother because the cancer is in her lungs. The daughter because there is no one she loves more.

* * *

The women know they will continue to laugh, no matter the diagnosis, because Starr's doctor looks like he walked off a Hallmark movie set. Pretty instead of handsome. Fit. Salt-and-pepper hair. Five o'clock shadow.

No wedding ring. That's the first problem.

The second is his metaphors. When he delivers the diagnosis, he makes the mistake of describing cancer as a boxing opponent. His pep talk ends with, "Together with the treatments, we'll give cancer the old one-two. Right, Starr?"

Starr lowers the register of her voice and answers, "Right, Coach." Then she slips off the exam table, punches the air, and dances around chanting popular lines from *Rocky*.

Anna has never seen more than a meme of *Rocky*, but she knows every word to "Eye of the Tiger," which she begins to sing. Off-key. The women crescendo on the chorus. And despite them poking fun, the doctor leans against the exam room door, clutches his iPad to his chest, and laughs right along with them.

"What do you think, Doc?" Anna asks, gesturing to her still-dancing, still-gorgeous mother.

His answer: "Keep that sense of humor. It'll carry you through this thing."

Starr wheels toward him, winks, and says, "If laughter doesn't, flirting will."

"*Hallmark*," Anna mouths as the doctor returns the wink.

Starr raises her eyebrows, pleased with his response. "If that's your bedside manner, break a HIPAA rule and call me later." She makes a phone with her thumb and pinky finger and wags it beside her ear.

Anna groans on cue, accepting her part in the shtick. At least this guy is a doctor. No belt buckle the size of his face. No mullet. And presumably, he doesn't owe a man named the Copter forty thousand dollars. That puts him several important steps above Starr's last romantic hoorah.

"You two ladies are a hoot," he says before he leaves.

He will go home that evening and ask his girlfriend to marry him. Something about Starr reminds him of what's important. She has that effect on people.

The minute the door closes, Starr collapses against the exam table, out of breath, out of energy . . . out of everything. Anna drops a kiss on her mother's head and helps her onto the table. "That was kind of you."

"Well," Starr says, her breath still airy from exertion. "Imagine handing out death sentences"—the cough starts deep in her throat—"Every day. Sounds worse than cancer, dontcha think?" She is bent double by the end of the sentence.

Anna strokes her mother's back until her body quiets and then unties the gown. Redressing exhausts Starr, even with Anna's help. Anna is careful around the bruises, always gentle, and when she finishes, her mother's sweatshirt looks like it's still on a hanger. The treatment will take more of her. There isn't much left.

The nurse returns and explains Starr's treatment options. At the end of the speech, she tacks on, "Hopefully the procedures and meds will be offset by your insurance. Nearly free, if you ask me." She pats Starr's shoulder like it's all a done deal.

Starr and Anna paste kindness across their faces rather than burst this nurse's bubble. After all, she's doing her job, and "offset by your insurance" and "nearly free" is likely the whole kit and caboodle for most people.

People who aren't from Luxor.

Anna and Starr have the misfortune of being from a town so poor that even the mayor doesn't flush his toilet after every use. There aren't a different set of rules for people who grew up in Luxor, Illinois; there are different games.

Years later, when that same nurse falls in love with a man from Luxor, she'll remember Starr and Anna and how helpless they seemed. She'll regret her choice of words. Her obliviousness. Her privilege. And she'll understand that the *nearly free* she offered Starr was similar to "free" circus tickets for those who visit traveling big tops that take over mall parking lots. Nearly free is actually very expensive.

So, as the nurse rattles off upcoming appointment dates and treatment schedules, Anna maths Starr's survival.

126 miles round trip
divided by an old, unreliable truck
times \$4 a gallon
times a minimum of 25 appointments
plus "nearly free" co-payments that start after a \$10,000 de-
ductible
plus vitamins not covered by insurance
equals
bad news

CHAPTER 2

IN THE TRUCK, MOTHER AND daughter tap the radio volume at the same time and grin happily at their usual kismet. They do not discuss the diagnosis or the expenses ahead. They stare out the window as they pass the last of the city buildings. The music thrums and eggs them on. Their route home is a two-lane state highway with steep shoulders. You have to drive it like you mean it.

Starr reminds Anna exactly where the police cruisers often lay in wait, as she always does. And Anna says, “Yes, Mother, I’ve driven before,” which pulls a huff from Starr. They agree on many things. Anna’s style behind the wheel isn’t among them. Anna needs the power of controlling the vehicle. Difficult emotions are better digested above sixty miles an hour on a curvy country road. Starr needs her darling daughter to slow the eff down so she can die of cancer rather than by putting the truck through a tree.

Fall colors their world orange and yellow and red. The leaves whoosh across the blacktop in tiny whirlwinds. The view offers a distraction from their thoughts. Fields and churches. Ponds added to front yards. Grain bins. A landscape so beautiful and simple it begs you to lower the window and take a huge drink of country air.

Starr says dreamily, “Baby, I can’t imagine a world without fall or dogs.”

“Why would you even try?”

“You should rescue another dog,” Starr says

“I’ll think about it.” Anna is actually thinking, *Dog food is expensive.*

Simon and Garfunkel sing them all the way back to Bent Tree and then across the long rainbow-shaped cage bridge to Luxor. They need a good rain. The shore of the Ohio is longer than it should be. From high on the bridge, Anna can’t see the fish carcasses on the rocks, but they’re there.

Without any hint of a turn signal, Anna whips into the Luxor High School parking lot and drives behind the school to the football field. Starr starts to protest and stops herself. If she had said what was on her heart, it would have been, “Darling, I have to pee.” At which point, Anna might have turned the truck toward their farmhouse, because holding your bladder was a brutal thing. She stays silent instead. Anna doesn’t do anything accidentally. If they’re here, she has a reason.

At the small, dilapidated stadium, Anna wraps her arm around her mother’s waist and leads her along the concrete walkway cracked by time and weeds, past the unmanned ticket booth, and up the bleachers. Neither woman likes football. They attended games when Anna was in high school out of boredom and then out of obligation when Anna went to work for the school system.

Anna is fairly sure her mother has to pee, but her gut says to sit on the bleachers at the football field, and she is a gut-follower. So there they sit, with clasped hands, humming “Scarborough Fair” under their breath, waiting on something unknown to happen.

The sun hovers near the horizon line, in that annoying place that

turns your vision into tiny blinking balls of yellow light. The women squint at the practice below, their ears full of whistles, helmet slaps, and crunching collisions. Is there anything as vulgar as freshmen boys cussing at each other?

Through all the noise, Anna thinks about her mother. That silly, wonderful *Rocky* dance. How in many ways it is the very essence of Starr.

For Anna, Starr is . . .

Better than a hero in a postapocalyptic movie.

A giantess of love.

A one-stop parenthood shop.

And her very best friend.

(Despite her need to offer driving advice. No one is perfect, after all.)

Meanwhile, Starr thinks first about the way her doctor looked in his khaki pants and questions if she might live long enough to slip them off his hips. Probably not. But she will live plenty long enough to fantasize.

Then they both think about cancer for far too long.

“Mom,” Anna says after the boys jog to the locker room.

“When I’m gone, do not sell the farm.” Starr’s voice is harsh and scared for the first time that day.

Anna squeezes her mother’s hand in that slightly annoyed, slightly reassuring way that daughters do when they’ve been warned many times about something they have zero intention of doing. *Don’t drink and drive. Don’t get teenage pregnant. Don’t marry a Northerner.* The *Do not sell the farm* lecture is old and worn. But for the first time in their relation-

ship, it's a viable option. Anna has been trying to think of a way to bring up the topic. "Mom, we'll do what we have to do—"

"No."

Anna scoffs at the stubbornness. "You're being ridiculous."

"Promise me," Starr says. Anna understands the plea. Starr is an intensely private woman. They aren't one of those "Welcome, y'all" families. The metal gate stretched across the end of their driveway has five Private Property signs.

"I won't," Anna says, but then she does promise, because if she only has eight months left with her mother—and that was what the doctor said, eight months if she forgoes treatments—she isn't going to spend them fighting.

Starr pats her daughter's knee and then squeezes it gently. "After I'm gone, the rule's the same: the house and barns are private."

"You're not going anywhere. Except to treatments," Anna says.

That draws a smile from Starr and a polite change of subject. "Baby girl, why are we here?"

The sun is down by then and twilight grays the field. Anna points to the perimeter fence where hundreds of Styrofoam cups press through the chain link. They spell out the words *Relay for Life* in large four-foot letters, although most of the *F* is gone.

"Next year we're going to walk in the Relay for Life. You and me. We're going to do more than give cancer the old one-two. We're going to kick cancer in the balls with a metal-toed boot. You understand?"

Starr lays her head in Anna's lap. The gesture isn't a yes or a no; it's a thank-you for a love that looks into the future and grasps for hope.

The two women stay clutching each other until Starr lifts her face off Anna's tear-soaked thighs and says, "My silly goose, it's time for hot dogs and *NCIS!*"

“Okay, my crazy duck,” Anna replies.

At which point they hurry home and Starr finally gets to pee.

Though she doesn’t flush. No need to waste water when there is so much money they need to save.



CHAPTER 3

ANNA IS FOREVER THE SILLY goose and her mother the crazy duck.

She loves other people, but no one the way she loves Starr. Especially after she ended things with Jack. Jack is the ex-fiancé, ex love of her life, ex non-asshole of assholes, which is quite a complicated thing to be. How can a man be the best and the worst at the same time? And what does it say about her that she never let him explain?

Regardless, Anna is over thirty and hasn't gone on a date in over three years. And yes, she sleeps in her childhood bedroom; and yes, there have been job offers and partners from other towns, but none are magnetic enough to pull her heart away from Jack or her life away from Starr.

Now Starr's the one being pulled away.

Without the treatments, there is little to no hope. Selling the farm makes sense. That will be more than enough money to put them in a small Luxor apartment and cover gas and needs. Anna understands the sentiment of loving land like a person, but not the actuality. Their property is breathtaking, but at the end of the day it's merely dirt and seeds.

“Dirt and seeds are hope and love,” her mother always says.

But what good is hope and love without her mother?

To be fair, the farm is a Ryder legacy. In 1943, Luxor, Illinois, was a booming river and train town. Starr’s grandfather built the family home on fifteen-foot steel risers. Wise man. His home, like the Lodges in Kentucky, avoid all the seasonal flooding that comes with living in a river town flood zone. The baby-blue clapboard farmhouse rises from the middle of their fifty acres like a squatty watchtower, and the Ohio River runs a quarter mile behind the acreage. When the wind blows, they are close enough to smell the cigarette smoke of the men working the barges.

In a non-flood year, the fields surrounding the house yield one of the best crops in the county. Starr lives on the crop money, so over time, even their small yard became part of the field. Two ruts lead from the old iron gate to a parking place under the house. They carry on all the way back to the barn, buildings, and creek. Everything else is cornstalks, beans, or wheat.

If you live on a river and farm, you spend more time praying about rain than you do breathing. You need it to come. You need it to stop. The spring before Anna was set to leave for college, Luxor had what the meteorologist called a five-hundred-year flood.

Everything within six miles that wasn’t on risers was damaged. Many of the homes. All the crops. Anna and Starr were trapped in their house for four days. By the time the bottom steps of the deck dried and Anna put her foot back on the muddy earth, she knew she wasn’t leaving Luxor or Starr. She turned down every scholarship and got one of the only jobs in town.

Her paycheck kept them from losing the farm.

When Starr has a glass or two of wine, she says Anna kept them

from losing far more, but she never explained what.

Starr is a woman with secrets.

And while Anna sometimes considers it a betrayal, and sometimes fights about the secrets with Starr (and never wins), and sometimes grows restless with sacrificing so much for a cause she can't name or understand, she does it anyway. And somehow finds a way to do it with love.

* * *

Starr has a reason they cannot sell that has nothing to do with “the Ryder legacy” she spouts off about when asked. Many years before, something hideous was hidden in the barn at the end of ruts. Starr knows she will have to tell Anna about it soon, but she's not ready.

The trouble with the truth is this: we can't always control when it comes.

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CHAPTER 4

THE DAY AFTER HER MOTHER'S diagnosis, Anna explains Starr's condition to her boss at the high school. He is the only person she tells. How lonely is that. She wouldn't have told him except she asked for a raise and thought an explanation might help her cause.

He laughs at her request so hard he snorts. Dan isn't an attractive man and he has a rather large nose, so the snort sounds like a goose. "Look around," he honks. "You're smarter than that question."

"I know." And Anna did know. Luxor High had cut programs right and left. They even sold their buses after the school district confirmed it couldn't afford to fuel them for the third year in a row.

Anna sighs deeply at Dan's rebuke and decides she'll ask the school's janitor if she can hide out in the library after hours and pick up some type of online work.

Starr won't have the internet, and both women have pay-as-you-go phones. Even on the years they can afford better service, connectivity of any kind makes Starr suspicious. Anna regrets the day she opened Google Earth on a school computer and showed Starr the satellite images of their house and land. "Why in the name of Peter, Paul, and Mary is the government allowed to do that?" Starr had asked. "I

might have been making love on the deck and they'd have a picture of my hind end for all the world to see."

Across from Anna, Dan clears his throat of all honking and fiddles nervously with the top button of his dress shirt. "Actually, Anna . . ."

The blood drains from Anna's forehead to her chin. She slouches lower in her chair.

Dan continues, "I realize this is extraordinarily bad timing, but the superintendent called last night and . . . well, they're cutting the in-school suspension program."

"What about the students?" Anna manages to ask when she wants to rage and stomp and scream, "What about my mother's cancer?"

Dan raises his hands, helpless. "What about the ones who need a bus? We don't have two pennies to our name. You know I'm sorry and I need you, but I don't have a choice."

As Anna is the only employee of Luxor High willing to break up a knife fight and the only person on his staff, other than him, who has lasted longer than three years, he is right about needing her.

"When?" Her brain whirls with fear, tears already welling in her bright gray eyes.

"Today," he says uncomfortably. "End of pay period. I'm sorry. I'll write you a great recommendation."

"Thanks, Dan." She stands to her full height, which is considerably higher than his, shakes his hand, and forces a nicety he doesn't deserve. "Thanks, Dan."

"Anna."

"Yeah?" she says, hoping he might offer a job suggestion.

"Don't forget to collect your take-out containers from the staff fridge."

Anna marches straight to the kitchen, removes her containers as

well as Dan's, and leaves Luxor High without looking back.

She wastes no time. She drives from the high school to the Methodist church. Bless them, they pay for strong Wi-Fi. All the cars in the lot are occupied with people on their devices. None of them are running and it's below forty degrees. She tugs a red knitted hat over her ears, makes a résumé, and eats Dan's cold leftovers.

After four hours of searching, one thing is clear: there are no jobs in Luxor.



Day One



CHAPTER 5

FOUR GUNSHOTS SPLIT THE MORNING air. A man's blood seeps into the backwater marsh. The man, still warm and nearing the veil, is dragged onto a tarp and rolled like a carpet.

Who is he?

A seasonal lodge worker in the wrong place at the wrong time who made the mistake of confronting his boss. The moment he said, "I overheard something about a crate of missiles you plan to sell and I'm not okay with it," his ticket was up.

You don't threaten the livelihood of the Lodges' owners.

The dead man knew nothing of the auction taking place during the upcoming hunting event.

Or the three thousand straw sale assault weapons.

Or which of his bosses runs the illegal operation.

He'd just been a man who needed a job.

CHAPTER 6

IT'S EARLY MORNING, BEFORE THE alarm. Gunshots echo across the Ohio River. Anna doesn't count the rounds. Four? Five maybe? Her bedroom window faces east, and when her curtains are pinned back, she has a perfect view of the Kentucky marshes and the Luxor Bridge without even moving her head.

She questions which hunting season it is and checks the date. Duck or goose probably.

Those gunshots, usually an annoyance, signal a strange slice of hope. The Lodges hires seasonal workers every fall. Luxor doesn't have jobs, but Bent Tree might.

Oh, Ryder, she thinks, that is a very bad idea and pulls the covers over her eyes the way she did as a child.

Sometimes a bad idea is the only idea.

When you need a job, you need a job. Even if the employer is tied to your ex-fiancé and your mother's ex-boyfriend and you've been told your entire life, "You can work anywhere you want except the Lodges."

Down the hall, her mother coughs. The rattle of her lungs is louder than all the gunshots in Bent Tree put together.

CHAPTER 7

FOSTER PORTAGE HAS SECRETS.

Many are secrets she shares with her husband. Many are not.

That is the way life works. Some words and conversations roll through your mind like they must be composted prior to speaking. Others you spit out of your mouth like a cannon.

Foster can't afford to stay in cannon mode, which was once her natural state of being. Not since she agreed to be Gary Portage's wife and inherited the task of dealing with her mother-in-law, Marth (not Martha, heaven forbid you make that mistake), and Lavinia Collins. Those women are a vibe. Rich. Powerful. Opinionated. They wear high heels in the mudflats and drink champagne for breakfast. Foster pretends she is cut from the same silk.

Gary lied to them about Foster's past, which doesn't bother her in the least. In her husband's narrative, Foster belongs to one mother and father, rather than the forty-three homes she occupied from age three to seventeen in the swamp that was Miami. No one at the Lodges knows she was in the military prior to becoming an influencer, and no one knows about her former ties to Bent Tree.

The money is nice, but the upkeep of being Mrs. Gary Portage

has its downside.

Currently she lies in a tiny room receiving a Brazilian wax from a woman named Cindi Leechman. These “services” always make her cry, but she never screams. She closes her eyes while sweet Cindi talks about her obsession with the baby monkey videos on Facebook. She even pauses mid-wax to show one and it takes everything Foster has not to say, “Bitch, get on with it.”

Does Foster need to go to this extreme? Unfortunately, yes. Rich women have many means of sussing out frauds. Primarily beauty rituals: saunas, massages, mud baths. Therefore, Foster has been lavished with milk sprays and bee venom and rare scented oils. She is so oily she can get a second job as a bowling alley lane.

Foster knows she will end up naked in the same sauna with her mother-in-law and Lavinia Collins before the Royale ends, and they know luxury better than anyone. If poverty has a smell, wealth has a texture. Foster can't afford to have one hair out of place.

This is Starr Ryder's fault, and at the moment Foster wants to kill her.

CHAPTER 8

THE MORNING OF THE GUNSHOTS,

. . . the morning Foster is being waxed,

. . . the morning the murder takes place,

Anna breaks down and types *The Lodges, Bent Tree, Kentucky* into Google and reads the “We’re hiring” banner.

“Of course,” she says to herself, laughing at the horrible irony.

There are many reasons she hates the idea.

Most start with *J* and end with *ack*.

Jack Higgins.

He breeds, trains, and boards hunting dogs for the Lodges. Such a position means he not only works there, he lives on the property year-round. His parents and grandparents go back generations with the Lodges’ owners. Anna’s level of pain and resentment for this man is best captured by understanding their proximity: the former love of Anna’s life lives and works four miles away by road, less than one mile as the crow flies, and she hasn’t laid eyes on him in years.

Except online. Once on a dating website, which she checked using her mother’s profile. Thereby confirming that he had moved on from their engagement. And also on his Facebook business page, where he

sells hunting dogs. Spaniels and retrievers. She was checking on the dogs, she told herself, and then hurriedly x-ed out of the page when her mother caught her spying.

Online, Jack had looked the same, except more chiseled in the face and stockier than the stick he used to be. His kind eyes were still the fixture of his face.

Seeing him gutted her.

Love can make you feel so powerless even if you're the one with the power.

Jack had begged Anna to listen to reason and she blocked his number. He then attempted to explain his situation and Anna yelled through the gate that she would call the cops if he showed up on their property again. She cut him out of her life with one sharp slice. But you can't cut someone out of your heart so easily.

Who has the power now? she wonders.

Much like the day she had canceled all her college scholarships, what has to be done, has to be done, whether she wants it or not. There is a job open at the Lodges and Jack has the clout and connections to get a woman from Luxor a job.

How to go about asking? Unblock his number and call? Drive over there? Unless he has radically changed since they were together, she knows what makes Jack tick. Connection. Being a hero. Choosing kindness. She will go in person, tell him about Starr, and he will help. Even if he despises her.

Helping is who Jack is.

CHAPTER 9

BENT TREE, KENTUCKY, HOME OF the Lodges, is a drive-through town in a drive-through county in a drive-through state without a single drive-through restaurant. Still, they hold three claims to fame.

First, the convergence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers: Luxor, Illinois, on one side; Bent Tree, Kentucky, on the other. A river convergence doesn't sound like a tourist attraction, but Anna once heard of a visiting high school track team that drove an extra hour to pee off the bridge into the exact place the waters mixed. And their coach did the same thing twenty years before.

Then there are the Choir Girls. To date, eleven podcasts have covered the unsolved crime. Gruesome stuff, but honestly, the people of Bent Tree don't think about it much. Maybe that's because not many of them are deep thinkers. Maybe that's because there isn't a dang thing they can change about the crime now. But it's probably because every last one of those murdered girls was from somewhere other than Bent Tree. If those had been *their* girls, they wouldn't have rested until there was revenge. In this case, they've been resting on their "oh wells" for thirty years.

Lastly, hunters know the area like parades know Macy's. The hunt-

ing is exquisite. The Lodges has been named a top-five destination by everyone from *Guns and Ammo* to *USA Today*. And every year the Lodges hosts a world-famous hunting experience called the Royale. Despite the jokes and stereotypes, hunters are not poor, snaggle-toothed men with *Momma Forever* tattoos who drive rusted-out pickups loaded with Bud Lights. These days, hunters are women and men, Republicans and Democrats, gays and straights, Christians and atheists, and among them are the rich and the superrich. The I percenters. The ones who buy five-hundred-dollar coolers the size of a Happy Meal.

Also the ones capable of purchasing weapons illegally.

Once a year this armed variety converges on the Lodges like someone rang a bell calling all the camouflaged souls to gather at the river.

The 99 percenters trickle into Bent Tree on everything from four-wheelers to Land Rovers to river barges. They camp. They rent. They motel, as there are no proper or reputable hotels chains in over seventy miles. They partake of the local BeeGee Restaurant's pond-raised catfish. Spend money at Bent Tree's gas pumps and dollar stores. They know they're lucky to have a ticket to the Royale.

By contrast, the I percenters land on a private airstrip and Jack Higgins hauls their duffels and hard cases to one of the three hunting clubs on the Lodges' property. Together, the clubs own a hundred thousand acres of the best waterfowl marshland in the world. Each club is filled with various accoutrements for the modern-day hunter and employs a stack of experts: civil engineers, chefs, bourbon distillers, Humvee drivers, etc.

Jack Higgins is the dog expert, and he's as good as they come.

Except when it comes to Anna Ryder.

Audio File #1

I found out about you today.

I've spent most of my life being wordy. And right now I'm speechless.

This would be easier if I knew your name.

For the sake of this recording, I'm going to name you Beck. *Beck* means "someone who lives by the water." It was my great-grandmother's maiden name, and when I saw it written on the family tree in my mother's Bible, I said to myself, "If I ever have a kid, I'll name them Beck."

So . . . Beck, I'm sorry you don't know me. You've never heard me say I love you or I'm proud of you. And I'm sorry for whatever you've been told about me. It's likely not good. I'm starting this audio journal today hoping that someday we'll meet and I'll be able to show you how much I've always loved you. And God forbid, if something happens to me before we meet, you'll have some sense of me through these recordings.

I'm currently driving through Bent Tree, Kentucky. This is the place you came from. Since I don't know where you are, or what home feels like to you, I can only try to explain what it's like here.

The land almost feels like a person. Like the first friend you ever had. There's loyalty and love in the soil. When I was your age, I ran little plastic cars through the dirt and swam in the creek. I dug holes and planted seeds. I made

forts in the woods and ran barefoot through the tall grass. I stepped on bumblebees and caught lightning bugs in jars. I fed the ducks bread and the dogs table scraps. I stepped in cow poop and drank from a water hose. We stare at the sky in the morning because the geese fly this way on their own little highway and at night because the whole universe is up there waving like a firework. I've heard cicadas so loud they sound like a helicopter landing, and I've watched a tornado move across the big field and throw a tree through the air like a pebble.

Oh, and there's so much water here, Beck. Creeks and rivers and ponds. They swell up and shrink down like the rafts we tube on in the summer. One minute all that water is out of control and the next it runs on down to Mississippi and leaves us dry as cracked pottery.

There's a feeling I wish you knew. Tackle box in one hand, fishing rod in the other. A dog loping by your side. You put the worm on the hook and wait for that first fish to nibble. Fireworks go off in your belly as you reel in your catch.

I guess what I'm trying to say is: my home is beautiful.

I hope wherever you are, your home is as beautiful as mine.

I hope wherever you are, you know you are loved, because that's more beautiful than any place can ever be.

CHAPTER 10

ANNA TOASTS THE BREAD HEELS for Starr and leaves them on her mother's bedside table with a cup of water and pain pills. Then she heats half a cup of quick oats and calculates how mad her mother would be if she pawned one of their rifles. The cabinets are empty. She'll hit the church food pantry on the way home, but she doesn't have any solution for gasoline other than selling something.

Unless she calls Waylon.

Starr has another doctor's appointment coming up and Anna's truck is down to three gallons of gas. The vehicle is already dustier than a windowless house in Kansas since she hasn't used the heat or air in a month, hoping that sacrifice might provide a little extra fuel economy. She needs at least twenty dollars to get to the appointment. If she's going to ask Jack for a job, she might as well pile on the fun and ask Waylon for money.

The raw belief among the Ryder women is Waylon Collins can fix most situations if they are willing to ask. Which isn't true, but it feels true, and a felt truth is sometimes more powerful than the real thing. Especially if you are sick or desperate, and Starr and Anna are both.

Starr would never ever ask Waylon. Period. Too much pride. Too

much anger. And too much love, Anna thinks.

This isn't the first time the Ryder women are in a bad way financially, but it's the first time Anna is without a job. Anna types Waylon's name into her phone and reads her last message to him from three years ago.

ANNA: Hey, need some gas money. Any chance you can help?

WAYLON: Sure.

That time he met her at the gas mart, filled up the truck, and handed over a red container with five more gallons. "Text me if that's not enough," he said and climbed into his big old Ford and drove away. The time before that, they met at the grocery. Before that, at Luxor High, on a day one of her tennis shoes fell apart and he brought her a new pair.

In Anna's youth, Waylon was always around. He was the first person other than Starr or Anna to have a key to their property's iron gate. He was always helpful, showing up with groceries and a *People* magazine. Starr loved *People* magazine and never bought one. For Anna, Waylon splurged on sparklers and chocolate and Ring Pops. There was even one Christmas Eve, when Anna was small, that Waylon brought over a firepit and a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken. "Ho, ho, ho. Winter picnic," he said through the hole in their screen door.

That was such a happy Christmas. The three of them lounged on deck chairs late into the night—Anna curled on Waylon's lap, fire swirling smoke into her dark hair, a light snow falling, while Waylon and her mother sang Hank Williams Sr. songs. When Anna woke in

her bed, it was Waylon who had carried her there and Waylon who had left a goldfish bowl on her desk. Her first pet. Winky.

Waylon and Starr would have married if love was the only thing two people needed.

Love can be so big and so very, very small. And sometimes it can be both at the same time. That's how it was for Waylon and Starr. Too big for one, too small for another, and never the same size at the same time.

Waylon is Waylon Collins of Bent Tree. He looks like his name sounds, as though he missed his best chance to be a country music star, big bushy beard and all. Ruddy. Every last bit of him is ruddy. The Collins family owns the smallest hunting club on the Lodges Incorporated property and the largest ego. Little Lodge is the nickname bestowed to their measly parcel of five thousand acres and their measly three-story state-of-the-art, twenty-five-thousand-square-foot facility. Between the main building and its outbuildings, Little Lodge sleeps one hundred people, not including staff. The property taxes alone are more than the average yearly income of someone from Luxor.

When Waylon professed his desire to marry Starr, his older brother, Topher, lifted his steak knife into the air and twisted it for effect. "You won't be doing that." A significant argument followed. First words, then fists. Neither brother won, and they only stopped the brawl when their mother, Lavinia, fired her pistol into the air and said, "Enough. You." She flicked an index finger at Waylon. "Starr Ryder is off-limits. It's settled." Next she glared at her oldest son. "And, you. Don't act like all this mess didn't start with you. Don't be useless or I'll cut you both off."

Waylon considered disregarding his family's mandate, right up un-

til Topher said, “You know I can tie you to the Mayfield Creek scene, so it sounds like you’re one anonymous tip away from a very small cell. So, what’ll it be, little brother, Starr or freedom?”

Waylon sighed with defeat. They had him over a barrel. He wasn’t scared of prison. Still isn’t. That he could do. But if he goes away, there is no one to look after Starr and Anna. Even if from afar. So it wasn’t a lack of love that tore Waylon and Starr apart; it was a failure of imagination.

Waylon lied to Starr about his predicament. He told her he loved her but had zero intention of marrying her. She and Anna would always be an important obligation and a business partnership, and sure they had fun when they were “playing house,” but he needed to keep friendship at the forefront instead of intimacy.

After which, a previously silent Starr asked to see Waylon’s gun.

Waylon removed the pistol from its holster and checked to make sure the safety was on before handing it over to Starr.

“This is safe?” she asked.

“Absolutely,” he assured her.

Starr broke his nose with the butt of the pistol. They both heard the cartilage snap. Tears had sprung to Waylon’s eyes faster than the blood rolled into his mouth. “What’d you do that for?” he asked, the swelling already slurring the words.

Starr wanted to say something clever, something Waylon would remember when he looked in the mirror and spotted that crooked nose. All she came up with was, “Because you’re an asshole,” and then she set the gun on the coffee table and went to take a bath.

That night Waylon and his pistol disappeared over the Luxor Bridge.

Back to Bent Tree. To Little Lodge.

Seven miles by road. Seven hundred yards by water.
He could have moved to Tibet and been closer to Starr.

* * *

Starr still misses Waylon. There's no doubt in Anna's mind. Her mother bit her head off when Anna asked if Starr planned to tell Waylon about her diagnosis.

"No," Starr snapped. "And you're not going to either." There was so much passion, right at the surface, that Anna had grinned and Starr had said, "Oh, shut up."

The last time Anna brought up Waylon she and Starr had been home alone on a Friday night eating knockoff Lucky Charms. Anna made the mistake of saying, "You remember that Christmas Waylon came over with Kentucky Fried Chicken? Whew, I'd love some chicken right now."

What followed was a thirty-minute lecture on why the Ryder women didn't need Bent Tree men. "Stupid Waylon had his chance. Stupid Collins family. Not now. Not ever. Not even for the best chicken in the world." Starr could no more hold back her bitterness than a levee can handle thirty inches of rain in an hour.

But Anna could. To beat cancer, Anna can hold back damn near anything.

Anna types out the text to Waylon.

I need your help.