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Kristin Garth

an Avalon Hayes mystery

number
book

KURT KLINE 9:56 am

10:55, we meeting up?

NOLAN CHAMPION 9:56 am

Way the fuck out of my way.
Meet at the pasture. Bring Camp.

KURT KLINE 9:57 am

I don't know the dude and he's my
professor. Not weird at all. 🤔

NOLAN CHAMPION 9:58 am

Tell him I said so. He's down.
Trust.

KURT KLINE 9:59 am

Whatever. I'm late. We'll be there — or
I'll be there. I'll deliver the message.

“In memory, everything seems to happen to music.” Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*

KURT KLINE
is listening to Waste by Phish in 2012

Since the arrest, I was paranoid as shit. Hearing my text ping, seeing Nolan's name, I sweated like a bitch. Totally sucks, what I'm reduced to, feeling eyes on me, probation/house arrest for some dime bag bullshit. I hate this puritanical country with its hypocritical Judeo Christian theocratic platitudes and mores. I know who I am.

Should have never come back to America after making it out, on my own terms. Escaping Deerfield, I was back in Pensacola for a few months of wake, bake and fuck, my last hurrah before The University of Chicago pre-law, planned and paid for by Big Daddy, whether I wanted it or not.

Sure as shit did not want to be a lawyer. Dad made bank, no doubt. But whatever it is that makes people happy in this world, it doesn't come with a law degree. I can tell you that firsthand. But just like sending me away to prep school all the way in Massachusetts where I knew no one and it's cold as shit, when Big Daddy decided something was right for my future, it was a done deal. "Unless," as he'd always say, "you'd like to figure this all out for yourself, Kurt." By "figure out," he meant pay for -- and no, I didn't want that.

So I'd made it through Deerfield hiding in the warmest coats and pussy I could find, smoked out until my doom didn't register -- repeating a vicious cycle of unhappiness. That's how I handled life before the heart attack. While it drove me mad on the inside; on the outside I was pretty damn chill. Made decent grades. Didn't throw tantrums. Yeah, I liked to poke at the old man, answering his phone calls in Massachusetts, "Big Daddy, what's up?"

"You make it sound like you come from hillbillies, Kurt. What is this relentless need to demean yourself?"

"You live in the Redneck Riviera, Dad, like it or not."

"Well, I pay \$50,000 a year so you don't. Cut it out."

If I could bring him back to life, I'd never call him that again, go to the school he'd wanted, figure out a way to make it work. Push down the anxiety and doubt and questions that kept me sad with whatever resources were available -- it was why I was bring a fucking stranger/teacher to meet Nolan Champion at the pasture.

AB+

Pulling open the heavy ass door of Building B, my watch showed 10:06. Signing up for this class last minute, narrowly avoiding a probation violation, I'd read off Camp's name from the list on my schedule to Nolan, a UNF dropout, to get an appraisal on how rough my semester might be.

"No, shit. Camp's a trippy little fucker."

"You had him before?"

He'd laughed, "Naw."

I hadn't asked anything further, but then the texts came before class, and I realized exactly how Nolan knew my new professor.

Had no more time to contemplate them then. Camp might like weed, but I was sure he'd be pissed at me strolling in late on the first day. Inviting him to walk across campus to meet our mutual weed dealer after class seemed ill advised.

But what could I do, you know? Nolan was my kine bud hookup, reliable for Percocets, too, which Mom went through like Tic Tacs. Acquiring those fuckers made life at home a lot more bearable for the both of us. You do what you have to do.

Options for pharmaceutical networking were beyond limited. School was the only place I was allowed to drive the next six months. Judge said my probation officer, Mr. Kendrick, was authorized to visit the house, call any time day or night. If I wasn't at school and I wasn't there, it was straight to jail. No home visits yet, but he'd called at least once a week at different hours, so the constraints were real.

Saw the black letters on the side of the door, 203 and heard a grating, weaselly voice reciting a syllabus. Even before I'd fully made my way inside to see him, I knew he was a total douche.

"Oh, sweet Jesus, son, take a seat. Getting a contact high looking at you."

Everyone laughed at the pathetic attempt at humor from a senior citizen with the physique of a hunched junkie in a Jane's Addiction t-shirt. Walked to the closest open seat, head down.

"I think somebody's stuck in Seattle time." Camp threw a syllabus on my desk.

It took mad self control to not announce the message from his dealer then and there. But it was self-preservation too, I needed to stay in school, legally, even with jackholes like this. I'd never sell out Nolan. I'd already proven that in court. This is what life was back in Pensacola, unsatisfying compromises and bleak survival. House arrest, humiliation by idiotic adjunct addicts, all a part of a penance I'd continue to pay for crimes against a guileless blonde face who haunted my indica-induced dreams set to Waste by Phish.

In Europe, I'd been at a crossroads. Presented with a miracle, I'd broken and destroyed it. I could cry about it. And, oh, I had, stuck in my house for brutal weeks with my sky-high mother, contemplating life on killer weed until I came to the unavoidable conclusion that I was, in fact, a demon.

It was unimportant how – or why it had taken over me. It had. I heard its whispers from inside me, with the wrong ends of my ears, felt its clawed appendages against the inside of my ribcage. I'd learned in a bookstore in Europe to acknowledge the truth of the self. While Camp prattled on, I surveyed the room for any fair-headed little hotties on which to cut my sprouting hellion teeth.

Blonde ponytail, front row – who knew what color eyes because they were trained on Camp the Clown. He made manic gestures, moving about the front, a prancing moron. Sparkly, happy and innocent -- and very young, my new Bridget had no curls but that sleek taunting ponytail I looked forward to undoing.

These freshmen are getting younger and younger. Truthfully I was just too old to be in a freshmen class -- 21, delayed by my demonic education. Back in the land of disappointment and compromise, growing up, as they say, I looked at my blonde Bridget replacement. She would do.

ASTER PRICE

is listening to Opportunities by Pet Shop Boys in 1992

Thursday, after taco salads and Thelma and Louise, Daphne drove me to the track in new Nikes and forced me to run. I hadn't run, by choice, since cheer. Made it a mile without stopping, my thighs on fire, each breath a stab in the gut. Finally, she said, "We'll just walk the rest."

In the darkness and quiet of the track, humbled and exhausted, I'd finally said it: "Not many people have someone like you, who'd set them up like this. I'm not sure I'm a good investment."

"Don't you worry, you're an awesome investment. But you're right. Maybe I'm lonely. Can't trust people. Don't trust men because of what they want, and I don't trust women because they're snakes who all sell you out for some man – but I trust you. Do you know why?"

She moved close to me; I smelled the bubble gum scent of her lipgloss mixed with her subtle sweat – I'm sure this had been her easiest workout.

"Why?"

"Because you're neither. You're still a girl, so there's hope."

"Don't know how much hope because I'm 18; it's possible I'll be hissing, slithering and shedding skin any moment."

"You have a young heart. I'm counting on it. Three more laps, girlie. Not getting out of it this easy."

"My plan all along."

"Remember you're getting naked tomorrow night."

Tried to laugh it off, but I shivered at the thought, a powerful reminder. I picked up the pace to my roommate's approval.

AB-

Skin still hot and damp from the shower, aching in too many places to name, I pulled my Barbie sleep shirt over my head. Made a lazy shuffle over to what appeared to be the coziest futon in the universe. Summoning the strength to hurl my punished body onto the thin mattress, I heard my name being called from the other room.

"Yes?"

"Come here a sec."

Lights were out, the perpetually-on television dark. Music was playing – jazz? Then a voice emerged I realized was Sade -- Smooth Operator. Daphne sat in the middle of the couch, legs stretched long, feet gracefully pointed, in the new pink shoes with bows. The oblong glass coffee table that should have been before her was moved in front of the tv. Hair in pigtails, she was wearing tiny gray sleep shorts and a pink sports bra.

"Oh my God, you look terrified. Sit down, honey bunny."

No point trying to play it off. I was as scared as a virgin -- which I only barely wasn't. This room and this girl, to my admittedly naive eyes, were set for a seduction. I walked over, tentative as the bunny she'd just called me and sat beside her. She moved closer, smelling like baby oil. My hands shook, and she took one in hers.

"You don't know how to give a table dance."

Hadn't even thought about that. One thing to be on a stage-- but up close with a stranger? How would I ever?

"It's no big deal. You're overthinking, I can tell. That's why I made this place -- to practice." She made a dainty, dramatic flourish with an arm. "Welcome to Dolly's."

I looked around for the table in question -- nowhere to be seen.

"Daphne, no way I can get on a table in these shoes. I'll wind up in the emergency room."

"You don't get on a table, you melodramatic freak. They call it that because you do it there -- at a table, not at the stage."

"Oh," Some good news at last.

"I mean, sometimes, in the VIP, you'll do it like this on a couch."

"But I -- I don't even know what to -- "

"I'll show the moves and the rules. Now, shhhhh." She said it theatrically, standing then seductively, bending, an exaggerated finger held to her mouth. She pushed me back on the couch, nudged my thighs open, so she could get stand between them.

I heard Sade sing "Jezebel," and something in Daphne's face changed. She looked older and younger, experienced and pure, if that was possible.

She wasn't Daphne now. It was Dolly pulling off her bra, staring until I had to look away, curious but ashamed. It was Dolly running her hands through blonde pigtails against the curves of her breasts as she swayed before me ("never touch a nipple, against the law"). It was Dolly's head bent teasingly low upside down on top of my lap. ("at least six inches away from contact to be legal") Overturned pigtails brushed against the insides of my thighs, the edges of my heart-print underwear ("no touching below the shoulders with hands, but a quick sweep of private areas with your hair, legal and extremely effective"). It was Dolly's neck against my shoulders, arching her back on top of my own and moving -- her torso a wave undulating, without touching, holding her self ("again at least six inches") above my body. Flesh never touched flesh, but I felt a perverse intimacy, an electricity erupting goosebumps on my damp skin.

Dolly pulled herself up, pleased with the results of her work. She leaned in close, holding herself above me so her perfect breasts swayed inches from my face. Curiosity overwhelmed me. How would it feel to do something completely illegal and touch them? I was shocked at the thought.

"So have you figured out a name?" She'd whispered in my ear.

I paused for a second before whispering back, "Lola."

"Ooooh, so it's time for Lola's first dance."

"What do you mean?"

"What do you think's going to happen tomorrow night?"

"Trying not to think."

"Don't think. Dance. Get your shoes. Pick a CD. One song, whatever you like. I'm your captive."

I left Daphne on the couch, topless, like it was the most normal thing in the world. Picked up her open CD binder and clumsily put on the shoes. Finding my footing was no joke on the slippery royal blue tile floor. Wobbling, flipping pages of discs, I was looking for lyrics to boost my courage.

Feeling completely hopeless, I stumbled on it, the familiar image -- a man hiding his face in a leather jacket, a song for a girl with daddy issues, like me. Grabbed it, not allowing myself to reconsider and raced to the CD player.

Sounds of hushed, methodical drums melted into an Asian melody. I drifted toward the couch and my new teacher. When I was close, lost in my own dark thoughts, I attempted a small twirl. Narrowly avoided falling into Daphne's lap ("dangerously illegal") except for her quick reflexes. We both laughed, her steadying hand wrapped around my thigh.

"That's what I'm talking about."

"That I'm a clown?"

"Clowns don't make my nipples hard."

I blushed to look, but she was right.

"Keep going."

Turning, touching and teasing, as slow as I could -- choreography dictated by the difficulties of the shoes not any artistry. It seemed to work though. Daphne bounced on the couch and clapped at my rookie efforts at sensuality. Her hand on my thigh ("they could never do this, absolutely illegal") she pulled me inside her outstretched legs close while George Michael sang about nudity and fetishistic obsessive love.

"Take this off," indicating my top.

There was no getting out of it, but a little fight, if nothing else, would waste precious seconds of what was actually a much longer song than I remembered. So I turned my lips into the most playful, suggestive pout I could and leaned in close to her and whispered, "Do I have to?"

"Nicely done. And yes."

Pulling off the tiny nightshirt, I was embarrassed at the hardness of my own nipples in the cool apartment. Daphne never stopped examining my body and the moves. Sometimes like a teacher, she reminded me of a rule or taught me a trick. A few times, though, she leaned back, giving into it the way I imagined a man would.

The end of the song came, and I threw myself next to her on the couch.

"See? No big deal, right?" She whispered.

"No big deal," I parroted, but it was a lie. It was probably the biggest deal of my whole life.

JARED KLINE

is listening to Strangelove by Depeche Mode in 1992

"Callista, I didn't take a lunch. We worked through. They brought in sandwiches. Just got your messages, and I'm getting help. Calling Lenore myself. Lie down. Take Kurt into bed with you. If we can't get Kerry, I'll have Lenore call Julia and get her to relieve you, okay? Let me go, so I can call and get back in my depo."

Since 7:30 this morning, I'd been stuck in an arid, gray box with two other attorneys, a paralegal, a witness, my client and a court reporter with boobs poised to escape, any second, a hot pink lewdly low-cut v-neck. Watched Martin Stafford, my client and the Regional VP of the Secret Stuff Storage chain, eyes ping pong from our delusional witness to that bouncing cleavage. Who could blame him? It was a welcome diversion on a day as dull as this.

At 3:45, we took our first break. My client, opposing counsel and the buxom stenographer all raced to relieve themselves, smoke or silently scream. I should have chosen the latter. Instead, I called Lenore, my de facto crisis manager/ legal secretary, to hear about the five hysterical calls from Callista, my wife, the drug addict, and mother of my two-year-old son.

This break would last, at the outside, ten minutes before our motley crew would scurry back to reconvene. The homeless man's counsel had their work cut out for them salvaging damage I'd inflicted thus far. Plaintiff was suing my client Marty's company for \$5,000,000 for being inadvertently locked in one of the chain's storage units for 42 days (surviving on the ample supply of canned goods and juiced boxes he'd so conveniently chosen to store.) I called Lenore back.

"Must be out of her pills. I need somebody over there. Can't get ahold of Kerry."

"What -- well, who am I calling then? Kerry's the neighbor girl?"

"Yes, Tim Travers' daughter, the car guy. Kerry knows the drill. If she can't, call your sister. Figure it out, Lenore. I deputize you. They're back from the bathroom. Gotta run."

"Got it."

"I need more women like you in my life."

She laughed, and I knew what she was thinking. Lenore knew me a little too well.

O-

Claimant's lawyers' cross was incompetently brief. Maybe Marty and I were not the only ones with an enticing Friday night ahead of us. 4:42 according to the trusty Submariner, I had a few more facts to get on the record -- still plenty of time for ribeyes and chatter before 8:00 roll call. As much as I enjoyed treats at the end of a hard day's work, unlike these derelict juveniles across the table, I enjoyed them infinitely more when they were earned.

The depo ended at 5:45 after the most exciting verbal smackdown of the day. The two boy wonders tag-teamed me with a privilege objection triggering a pro forma call to the judge, predictably gone at this late hour. At a stand still, we'd have to wait for Monday to have the issue decided and to set a date for the depo to be continued.

Richard Englehoff, the shorter, younger and definitely junior boy wonder (I had to repeatedly stop myself from referring to as the Dick he so clearly was) offered Marty a half-ass apology for the inconvenience of yet another trip.

Marty shot me a sly look and shrugged, "No biggie. One more trip to the Pensacola Ballet."

The rookie jurists looked at each other then at us, awaiting an explanation they wouldn't receive. I grabbed the thick accordion file from the table. Marty grabbed his jacket, said his fond farewells to the court reporter. We walked out toward our mission of feasting, fantasy and forgetfulness. Even contemplating it, I felt young and animalistic. Such was the power of the "ballet."

A+

Our waitress, Melinda, settled us into a booth and brought two Jacks on the rocks. Waiting for our ribeyes (my poorly chosen French dip lunch order too cumbersome to ingest in the middle of a direct examination went mostly untouched), I made a quick note of the time, 6:45. Starving, I hoped the food would get her quick because roll call waited for no man.

We chose O'Malley's for its proximity to Frank's (the main event) because my current prima ballerina consort was a rigid stickler on time — a tiny, neurotic, pigtailed dictator, I'd come to discover (I habitually chose women with stunning physiques and a plethora of issues.) I'd been seeing Darlene, only at the club and a few proper, public lunches, as chaste as one of the Knights Templar, for three months. Took a month for her to trust me enough to reveal her real first name. How long for a last name?

Had the requisite post-depo case chitchat on the ride over (the homeless living in storage units and getting locked in was a growing problem in the industry). I'd already asked about the status of Marty's impending divorce, (ongoing at least a year before we'd work together, still no end in sight).

Marty walked in at the tail end of my phone call earlier with Lenore. Heard enough to know the status of the Callista dilemma remained unchanged. Once opposing counsel started cross, he'd scribbled on a legal pad, "Everything okay at home?"

Laughed a little too conspicuously. Davis Pierce, senior boy wonder, paused mid-question to stare me down with an expression of castigation.

"My apologies. Proceed."

I'd written back, "Tell you over drinks."

Hours later, he was following up on this decidedly depressing topic of conversation. Exhibit 28 of Marty Stafford qualifications as a standup-guy.

"Think anymore about that rehab? My friend's son is back in school, a changed human apparently."

Hated this conversation. It was, unquestionably, the right thing, but it risked Callista hating me, leaving and taking my son. Candidly, there were things she could use against me, too, indiscretions even a drug-addled mind must have noticed. My son might hate me for taking away the one physically present parent he had, the one he preferred

Wasn't as if my wife went out looking to be a drug addict. It was the result a grueling 30-hour labor, an emergency C-section and requisite Percocet prescription her OB/GYN refilled, without blinking an eye, three times. After that, Callista never was without some pain that required a visit or call to the doctor and a prescription.

The gravity of her condition registered when, out of Advil, I'd wandered to my wife's bathroom, opened the cabinet to find a Percocet bottle prescribed to MARCUS CARROLL in the center of her shelf. We'd attended a Christmas party at the Carrolls the previous week. My wife was not only an addict but now a thief.

Owed Marty an explanation as to why I couldn't take his sound advice.

"I just — I can't send her away from Kurt for months. Can't do it."

Marty knocked back his drink, and I followed. Liquor loosened my tongue enough to continue.

"Goddamn if I know what to say to that."

We were both happy for the distraction of Melinda, holding plates of meat, approaching our table.

"Bless you, my dear." I managed, mouth watering in contemplation, as she placed an enormous plate in front of me. We ate and drank in silence for a while, and then a thought crossed my mind that made me smile.

"Don't forget your name when we get there."

"Wait, what was it again? I remember. Mickey the Tooth."

Mickey the Tooth was an off-the-cuff invention by Marty on our first visit to Frank's, the first night I met Darlene, still Dolly to me then, and she'd ask: So what do you do for a living? I'd wanted to have a little fun, make an impression on a hot, young girl. Didn't give Marty a second of prep. "You seem trustworthy. My friend here deals in storage. If you've got a problem — a living, breathing kind of a problem, you need to lock away safe where it can do no harm -- well, he's a man that can take care of a thing like that."

It was cheesy theater though I'd delivered my lines with complete earnestness.

"That's fascinating. I know someone I'd like to see locked away."

She looked Marty up and down with a new kind of curiosity and interest. Made me a little worried I'd given him the best part in our little drama.

“Do you have one of those funny names, or is that just something from the movies?”

I almost intervened to save him from ruining the setup. Didn’t really know him yet enough to respect that crackerjack mind, the way I did now. Without a second of hesitation, he’d said, “You can call me Mickey the Tooth.”

Marty, or Mickey the Tooth, was someone I was proud to call a friend.

Dolly nodded and turned to me.

“You still haven’t answered my question. What do you do?”

“I’m his consigliere.”

“Well, well, well,” she appeared to believe our dubiously constructed yarn. So we’d continued, night after night,. Marty Stafford proved himself an invaluable wingman as he was a patron of the ballet.

AB-

O’Malleys delayed us longer than planned. Knew I was in trouble walking into Frank’s and hearing Dolly’s signature first song, Depeche Mode, Behind the Wheel. We’d apparently missed roll call, all the dancers lined up on were picked for the first table danced of the night. Ruined Marty’s getting the new girl’s first dance. Paying our covers, I skipped my usual pleasantries with the leggy blonde who worked the door.

“Find us a place at the stage.”

I’d yelled it at Marty, jogging straight to the bar, turning two hundreds into two large piles of ones, the only suitable mea culpa for my anxiety-ridden schoolgirl writhing on stage. Somewhere with her was her new friend, too. They were obviously a big success; the stage was packed with enthused, animated admirers obscuring the girls’ gyrating, crouched bodies. I could only see a slice of a leg or arm through the crowd as they maneuvered around the stage floor. The older bartender retrieved my piles of dollars quickly.

“A forecast for rain tonight?”

“That’s me, buddy, the rainmaker.”

Working my way through the crowd to the stage, Marty’s voice boomed over the music and the accompanying slick strip club DJ monologue, “Jerry. Over here.”

Jerry, like the Tooth, was another underworld affectation more fitting than my actual nerdy name -- Jared. On the opposite side of the stage, Marty patted the back of an adjacent empty seat. Making my way towards him, the very reason I was there became halfway visible.

Between her and me, a row of puerile student aviators with buzzed haircuts swarmed. She was stretched out, in front, only the knot at the bottom of her shirt visible (first song), arching her back. She looked longer, frailer, arms floating delicately above her, a motion I’d never seen her make before. The boys in front of her were as quiet and entranced with the display as me, one standing, leaning over her torso, dropping bill after

bill. Eyesballs bored into her obscured, to me, face – the face still blocked by his buddies' bodies.

The closest never touched, stayed in bounds, but there was an intimacy -- I got hot with a fierce jealousy Dolly/Darlene had never before inspired. The easily 300 pound bouncer, muscles cutting through his maroon Frank's shirt was maybe three feet away -- eyes on the youngsters, waiting for them to slip. He didn't seem to notice me at all, though I was probably the larger threat.

Standing boy sat, satiated as much he could be in the club. His friend leaned back to whisper something I'm glad I didn't hear, and opened a vantage point to a pale heart-shaped face with a sprinkle of freckles and a shock of long red braided hair. The stranger turned her body in my direction and noticed me, one more watcher -- another completely enthralled, irrationally smitten stranger. She beamed, a smile that felt like an invitation I had not the constitution to decline.

My heart ached, standing there, stranded, staring into gray poetic eyes -- the wrong eyes, one more complication in the shit-storm that had become my life.

AB+

Marty was chuckling, amused at my ridiculous infatuation, "You're gonna make your girlfriend jealous."

I took a seat in the chair next to him, quickly looking for Darlene, who I'd still not managed to connect with yet. Thankfully, she was preoccupied with her own fan club at the far side of the stage. The music changed, and the two girls both unbuttoned their shirts. The stage suddenly became even more jammed with male bodies waiting for a little personal attention and up close view. Darlene made her way over to me with a real frown, no put-on pout.

"What happened? I thought you weren't coming.

"Long day at the office, little lady. All yours now. We're going to have a great time. I promise."

She looked at me like she wasn't sure about something.

"Lie down."

Seeing the money in my hand, her face instantly lit up. Laying down, as docile as a lamb, she let me cover her in a blanket of green while Depeche Mode serenaded us with Everything Counts.

I'd intended to give the other pile of ones to Marty to cover Lola (real name I was determined to know as soon as possible), but I just couldn't give away my shot at another interaction.

"Call your friend over. Have to celebrate her first night."

Lola was midway through teasing a white-haired man when Darlene caught her eye. Lola held out her garter, collected her money and hurried over.

"Lie down. He's got a present."

Up close to Darlene's friend – I wouldn't let myself call her Lola -- my desire only grew. She smelled like

sunflowers and life to me and blushed when I dispatched the dollars across her topless frame quicker than intended. Maybe it was Dolly's watchfulness, I wasn't sure, but for the first time in ages, I was actually nervous.

Money rolling off that pristine body, not-Lola sat up, mouthing a quiet little "thank you. I wanted to take her somewhere quiet to talk – my new friend without a real name yet.

"Who wants to go to the champagne room?"

Darlene bounced up and down. Music ending, she used her arms to propel her body over the drink rail, legs off the side of the stage to join Marty (or Mickey), now old friends. Not-Lola remained, unsure how to navigate her way off the stage like this. Getting used to those shoes had to be a bitch.

"Give me your hand."

Holding my hand, she got down. Still holding it, we followed at a safe distance behind our friends.

When the other two turned into the champagne room, I stopped and touched her face.

"Please. You have to tell me your name, your real name."

She giggled and gave one long blink and spoke.

"Aster. Please don't tell Dolly. She'd be so mad."

"Don't worry. I can keep a secret."

ASTER PRICE is listening to Careless Whisper by George Michael in 1992

We were an awkward, uneasy foursome in the VIP -- two pining for each other, feigning interest in two other volatile people we were scared to displease. Every table dance I did for Mickey, I stared at his big hands, puffy, ringed fingers, imagined the crimes and violence they'd manifested – a side of this man I did not want to meet.

Jerry kept Dolly dancing a lot. Every time she turned her back, teasingly grinding the air above his crotch, his eyes wandered from her perfect ass in a pink thong to my far less interesting eyes. Then I'd remember Mickey, what he was, and forced myself to look away.

Jerry turned our between-dance-chat into a game of "let's get to know the new girl" only serving to irritate Dolly more. She answered most times before I could even put together a thought. Her retorts ranged from lies (Your age? "She's 21, obviously," indicating the champagne -- legally sold to the waitress as we were both in fact very much under 21) to sarcasm (Hobbies? "Well, let's just say her idea of exercise is turning pages.") to

full-on hostility (Family? "Dad's dead, can't you tell?").

The viciousness of the last response stung. Felt mad as a snake and ready to do some wounding myself. Had my chance, too, when Jerry turned to her in my defense, and slapped his hand hard against her thigh (totally illegal and obviously an impetuous, gut reaction without thought to consequence).

Even Mickey seemed stunned.

"What's your problem, Darlene?"

He looked angry and disappointed, Daphne more than a little afraid. Everybody was quiet. My singular thought, even in the shock of the illegal smack, was: Who's Darlene? Almost said it out loud before I realizing what it actually meant. Assumed it was Jerry's mistake, mixing up names of women in his life. Looking at Daphne, though I saw her pleading blue eyes transmitting a message: please don't sell me out. She had given Jerry a fake real name (something she probably should have mentioned before now). Our eyes locked in a real standoff, my lips poised for annihilation. I let the tension linger long enough for her to reflect on the foolishness of her bitchiness.

"No big deal, Darlene." I said the name with just enough sarcasm to let her know I meant business. Then I looked at Jerry and continued.

"She's right. I'm just a girl without a daddy. Whatever will I do?"

Jerry's eyes kind of fluttered when I said it. Daphne rolled hers. Thankfully, Morgan, the waitress, returned to flirt and refill glasses. We sipped our drinks quietly until she wandered off.

Jerry steered the conversation to something less provocative, "What do you like to read?"

"Darlene" did not dare interrupt, shockingly silent on the topic of books.

"Well, I love Steinbeck, East of Eden."

Jerry face lit up with an expression of amused surprise, like he had just heard the very last thing he'd expected.

"So you go to college?"

This one tested the limits of Daphne's newfound constraint, laughed loud. Jerry looked confused.

"She'd need a GED first." When he didn't respond, she clarified further, "She's a high school dropout, just like me."

"That's sad," he shook his head. "You need a GED and to go to college. You're obviously a bright girl." Then, as an afterthought, he'd added, "I mean, both of you."

I didn't know what to say. I just wanted to crawl into his lap.

While Daphne was in the bathroom, he'd taken out a business card, folded it over behind the wad of bills in

the garter on my thigh.

"Be careful with that. Our secret, my direct line at work. Please call soon."

I nodded, feeling like I was holding flashing contraband on my leg, impossible for Daphne/Dolly/Darlene to ignore.

A-

In the dressing room, I pulled my garter belt off and threw the whole thing, folded, banded money, hidden top-secret message, into my purse and zipped it. Daphne was halfway into her street clothes when she turned to me, still in costume, absent only the garter belt and my shoes.

"Hey, I'm sorry. Okay? Goddamn these men are all the same. He obviously likes you. You're the new girl. It's not your fault. I shouldn't have been so mean."

It was clear Daphne didn't have a lot of experience with apologizing but doing her best. And I didn't deserve it.

I reached out and hugged her.

"Okay. Good. I didn't want this to turn weird, okay? Don't cut me out of my money, and we're good."

"I don't care about the money."

She pulled out of the hug, her expression pure disbelief. Love was a made up thing to Daphne, something I don't know if she'd ever experienced. A fairytale. Maybe it was to me, too, but I wanted that fairytale. I wanted nothing more than love, but I couldn't possibly confess that to Daphne of all people. Like those seven essential digits zipped up tight now inside my Hello Kitty quilted bag (and in my racing heart), some things are better kept to yourself.

A-

Monday morning, I called at the first opportunity. Daphne and I'd worked all weekend together, a blur of dancing, dudes and dollars, a financial windfall for us both. Daphne was positively giddy leaving Monday, around 10, off to the track for her three-mile morning run. On off days, Daphne ran twice, but I was, thankfully, only required to join once. Had waited for this opportunity all weekend.

Earnings aside, Saturday and Sunday were a drag without Jerry. I was the only one who really wanted him. Daphne wanted money, and she could get that from almost anybody; I'd witnessed it firsthand all weekend. I fantasized about Jerry all weekend and those numbers I taped to the bottom of my ballerina lamp -- memorized by the time I made the call.

As the phone rang and rang, I felt more than a little foolish. Maybe he'd been drunk and didn't even remember he'd done it. Almost hung up when I heard a woman's voice.

"Jared Kline's office."

She sounded young and chipper but also professional. I was mortified and unprepared, no idea what to say, what kind of message to leave. He certainly couldn't call me back here.

"So sorry, Mr. Kline gave me this number. Said it was his direct line."

"Oh, it's his private line. He's just on another line with a judge. Can I have him return your call?"

"No." It came out a little too bold, and I was instantly embarrassed. "Is there a good time to call him back?"

"Oh, yes. He should be done in fifteen, for sure. You wouldn't be Aster, by chance?"

His secretary knew my name? What else did she know? I could feel my cheeks get hot.

"Yes."

"I'm Lenore. Jared told me you might call. Call back in fifteen minutes, okay, promise? My life's much easier when he's happy."

She laughed, and I joined in, albeit nervously.

"Okay."

O-

The second call went extremely well. So, well, I was making my way to an appointed intersection, several streets from Daphne's apartment (and hopefully her detection) to be picked up for lunch. Stressed choosing an outfit casual enough for a supposed solitary neighborhood stroll but cute enough to please a man I could not stop thinking about -- with sensible shoes, because I'd have to walk.

Deciding on a khaki skirt and a short-sleeved mock turtleneck and Keds, I ran a brush through my hair and left, without even makeup. That's how afraid I was of Daphne at this point. When I got to the intersection of Lakeview and 19th, he was already there.

Watching my approach from his silver Mercedes, he was waving his fists in a boyish gesture of celebration. The fall breeze and his open window disturbed his too-serious brown hair in the best way. Sunshine bursting through clouds revealed golden highlights I'd never see in the darkness. He looked years younger outside.

In the club in the dark, I had the power. Outside, even in the fading sun, staring at his smile, I never felt more powerless.

"You've made my year. Do you know that?"

"Oh, Jerry."

"Jared, actually. Get in."

I made my way to the passenger side and opened the door. Slid into the seat and never felt as touched as I did between leather and the flesh of his hand grazing the top of my thigh.

"What are we doing?"

I wanted to say jinx because it was exactly what I was thinking -- but I stifled the silly little girl talk. Instead I said, "Well, Jared, you're taking me to lunch."

"That's right. I was thinking French, down by the park, but seeing you all I can think of is ice cream."

I hadn't had ice cream or sweets at all living with my fitness obsessed roommate who bought all the groceries and owned the only car. Nothing sounded better to me in my whole life.

"I think I'd do just about anything for a hot fudge sundae."

"You're going to be the end of me I can tell."

He drove me to Baskin Robbins while I watched his long fingers meander up my thigh.

B-

Over two sundaes, mine, mint chocolate chip, his, gold medal ribbon, sitting across from each other in candy striped chairs, he smiled.

"No way in hell you're 21."

"I've been 18 for less than a week."

"God. Keep going. Tell me more."

I summed up the story of my life, mostly my abbreviated senior year: my mother, Gulf Point High, Ms. Karr, Louis Kristol and the Guardian and even Geoffrey and the damned UFO he'd invented all to fuck me. And boy had he ever!

The UFO part peaked his interest; he put down his ice cream. I thought maybe he was jealous about the sex part, but it was the sci-fi element that captured his attention.

"Hey, you didn't work on that Gulf Point 5 stuff; did you? I've been dying to hear more about that. I just read they're out of jail."

"I hadn't heard that," but I was glad to hear anyone had overcome the consequences of these UFO lies. Maybe one day I would, too. "That was Brooke. Could have been me, maybe if things had been different."

It hurt to be reminded of the career I'd thrown away in the last few weeks. He reached across the table to take my hand in his while I reached the summit of my confession:

"I've made so many mistakes. Don't know how I got here, but I know I'm lost. I don't know who I even am anymore."

He looked at me with compassion.

"Hey, do you know how many times you're going to feel that way in your life? Had that exact thought at least twice last week."

I stared into his dark eyes full of nothing but kindness and understanding.

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?:" I said, wiping my eyes.

"Seriously, don't give up on education. It's not the answer to everything, but's it's a problem you can solve."

"I don't even know where to start."

"Don't worry. I'll help. Starting with that GED. Now, follow me out to the car. I brought you a present."

"A present. But you didn't even know we'd see each other today."

"A man can dream. Put it in the trunk this morning and hoped for the best. Now, here we are. I, for one, feel pretty damn lucky."

Outside, he'd opened the trunk and handed me a book. Turning it over, I saw the cover, Sanctuary by William Faulkner.

"If you like Steinbeck, I think you'll like this. No time like the present to continue one's education."

It was the first book a man ever gave me, and a gift chosen with me truly in mind. I wanted to kiss him so badly but I caught myself looking at the road. I was so afraid I'd see Daphne's Mustang, on the way back from the track. When I looked back at Jared, he was scoping out the street, too. Not looking for "Darlene," I was sure. He had other eyes to worry about. He was married -- it was easy to forget.

Out of nowhere, it started to rain, and we both climbed back in the car. I ran my finger down the cover of my book to erase the stray raindrops. He reached across the seat and took my face into his hands and kissed me hard. Pushing his seat back, he motioned for me to climb on top of him the way I'd ached to since we first met. He held me by my hair with one hand while fingers of the other made their way straight up my skirt and then inside me so suddenly I cried out, "Oh my God," unable to keep anything from him now. In the moment, it felt possible he'd ordered up this fortuitous torrential rain just for atmosphere and the modicum of privacy -- blurring the very mature sights and sounds inside this steamy vehicle from the departing patrons of the ice cream shop.

He unzipped his pants just as the rain let up, and I froze with the thought that he might take this any further here.

"Touch it, just for a minute."

He slid my hand inside his boxers, and I felt him huge and hard. His eyes looked as desperate suddenly as I felt. Then he took my hand away and kissed it, zipped himself away.

"It's okay. I have to get back today anyway."

He straightened his shirt and made the short drive back to East Hill, both of us excited and frustrated.

"Can you meet me at the same place Thursday, at noon? I'll have more time then."

Didn't even pretend to worry about logistic. They didn't matter now.

"Definitely."

"I've got a plan for an amazing lunch, a surprise."

"I'm intrigued."

B+

Reaching the familiar robin's egg blue of Daphne's place, a three-story worn Victorian house chopped into apartments, I climbed the outside stairs to our private perch on the top floor. Heard Daphne inside before I opened the door. She grabbed her smoothie from the kitchen counter and walked to meet me as I stepped inside.

"Hey, where'd you go?"

"Out for a walk. Nice day, thought I'd get a little exercise after all."

"Oh, really?"

Daphne didn't believe me at all. It was as if I was back at home dealing with my mother. That's when I remembered I was holding the book.

"Well, you look like you've been up to something, pink cheeks. Maybe I don't wanna know."

I tried to play it off.

"Yeah, maybe not."

Miraculously, it was left at that. She walked back into the kitchen with her smoothie; I took the opportunity to scurry off to the solace of my tiny room to read.

GEOFFREY CHASE

is listening to Gone Daddy Gone by The Violent Femmes in 1992

Twenty-four days since I'd seen Aster, and my mind could not let go. Miserable since the day she left, not only me, but life as we knew it, with a brutal efficiency.

Tried to meditate, but it was useless; couldn't clear my head. Tried to read only to get into imaginary arguments with Osbo. When I read, "Die to the past. Don't allow it to interfere with your present," I wanted to knock the smug fucker out. He clearly did not know my girl. The past was all I had. To let it go, to kill it off was beyond my capacity.

I'd done everything I could in these twenty-four days to contact Aster and throw myself at her mercy. Sure, if I could just get her to see me, in person, I could win her over, like I had so easily before. I think she knew it, too; it's why she hid herself so well.

Called easily a hundred times in those first few weeks to no avail. Her mother handled me, initially, with sympathy, then annoyance and, finally, threats to call my mother or the authorities if I didn't "stop this harassment." I refused to allow the moral superiority of a child batterer to deter my efforts. Until, finally, Mrs. Price answered the phone sounding as unhinged as me.

"Goddamnit, Geoffrey. She doesn't live here anymore. Please just leave me alone."

Didn't even respond, just hung up. Seemed unbelievable a mother would allow her teenage daughter to just move away. Yet it was clear from the desperation in her voice she was telling me the truth. The thought of Aster out there somewhere unknown was too dire to contemplate. I had to have an answer.

I had no clue how to begin an investigation. Aster didn't have schoolgirl friends to consult. I wracked my brain for a confidant. The only one who came to mind was Ms. Karr. Going to a teacher with a personal matter was a daunting enterprise, to say the least, but I was fresh out of options. Die to the past? I don't think so. Anything, no matter how awkward or difficult, was preferable to that.

I'd made my way to Ms. Karr's classroom before school started the next day, practicing my chakra breathing on the familiar walk to the back of the school. I'd taken typing last year. Deemed Ms. Karr to be kind, one of those teachers who grasped the import of their station. We weren't friendly though. Willing my hands to stop shaking, I pulled open the classroom door, so much riding on such a dubious plan.

She was at her desk. I knew from first glance, this was not going my way. Clad in black, pale and puffy eyed as if she'd just, this morning, been notified of a beloved one's death, Ms. Karr's face turned with fury pointed in my direction.

"Haven't you caused enough problems, Geoffrey Chase? Can't imagine what you have to say for yourself."

Even if I'd bothered to plead my case, it was clear from Ms. Karr's defeatist state she couldn't help. I was after information. She looked as hopeless as I felt. The last molecules of hope escaped my body in an exhale as I turned and walked out the door.

Two near sleepless days later, deliriously I drifted into seventh period video production, my sanctuary in this sanatorium, to news that hit my ears with all the subtlety of a crash of lightning.

"No, man, swear on my life, he saw her with his own eyes. Said he talked to her, too. She's working there at Frank's with Daphne Paugh. Aster Price in the flesh, know what I'm sayin'?"

The narrator of this blasphemy, Dennis Fowler, not a friend exactly, but someone I, obviously, mistook to be a decent guy laughed lewdly at his pun. Arthur Meadows, his audience, noticed me standing there, rage reddening my face, and cleared his throat, nodded in my direction. Arthur looked at the ground, appropriately embarrassed at this vile banter.

"What did you just say?"

The words left my mouth as my body traveled, divorced from reason, a reflex, at top speed to the kidney-shaped table where the two boys sat. Meadows jumped aside, removing the obstacle separating me from Fowler. I lifted that scrawny frame with ease right from his seat and would have surely struck his lying mouth if not for Mr. Demmy's unmistakable booming voice that shook me back to reality.

"What in the hell's going on in here? Chase, in the hall, now!"

I dropped Fowler, covering like a little bitch, back in his chair -- walked to the hall with Mr. Demmy right behind. A switch flipped inside me, endless sadness turned to rage. Realized, in that moment, I was as mad at Aster as that wimpy cretin with the lying mouth.

"Should be sending you to the office, Chase. You'd be suspended; you know that, right? Say something before I change my mind, son."

My brain raced to find words to navigate my way out of this fiasco, but I was at a loss. Desperate, I settled on the truth.

"Fowler was spreading lies about a girl in this school — my girlfriend."

Mr. Demmy peeked through the rectangular window and made an angry gesture summoning that mendacious bastard out to the hallway with us.

"Chase tells me you're spreading lies about a female student in this school."

Mr. Demmy and I studied Fowler, awaited his explanation with a, surprisingly, equally fierce intensity. Fowler was stubbornly mute.

"Speak or go to the assistant principal and explain this to him."

"Look, I — I shouldn't have said anything. It's just — it's something my older brother saw, not a lie," Fowler looked to me now. "It wasn't meant to be personal."

Mr. Demmy turned. Gestured with his hand like he expected me to say something back in return, clearly impatient with my silence.

“Geoffrey, I need to know this — whatever this is — is finished between the two of you. Okay? He’s apologized. Whatever he said, I don’t even want to know. Accept it and get to work or go get suspended. Your choice.”

“I accept your apology. We’re good.”

We weren’t, but taking this further wasn’t worth it. I wasn’t getting suspended for Dennis Fowler. That wouldn’t bring me any closer to Aster. Then, as I thought about it, I realized Fowler, without knowing it, had, unknowingly, done me a favor. I knew where to find Aster Price. Just had to find a way to get inside.

AB+

Ran camera for the school news, business as usual. Even the unavoidable back and forth with Fowler, unfortunately my tech director, was professional as I always strive to be. On the inside I was working out logistics of acquiring a fake ID — my only hope to get inside that nightmare place where Aster hid.

In this very building, I was sure, were kids with these credentials at their fingertips, but I didn’t know any. All the prime suspects, football players and other alleged heavy drinkers/partiers were outside the social grasp of a geek, self-proclaimed and otherwise, like me.

My mind went where it always did when I had a problem: my brother. Didn’t think Jameson possessed a fake ID himself. Since July, he’d aged out of any such need, but —

There it was, the solution, Jamison’s age hit me — the PERFECT PLAN. I wouldn’t need a fake ID at all. I had a brother who was 21, in possession of a genuine driver’s license to prove it — a brother, minus the hair and glasses, I was growing to resemble more and more each day. Glasses were a problem whose solution was so simple it hardly bothered mentioning. The hair (his blonde, mine almost black) -- hell, I’d bleach my hair if it came to it. That’s the level of my commitment. I’d do things far crazier than dye my hair to prove my love for Aster Price.

Jamison’s car was in the driveway, after school. Quiet in the house which meant mom was out. It was the perfect moment, free of adult ears, to plead my case to cash in a well-earned favor for the part he’d played in this whole travesty.

“Need to talk to you about something of the gravest importance.”

My serious diction coupled with the fact we hadn’t been talking as much of late caught Jamison’s attention.

“Sure. Shoot.”

“That girl you met, Aster, the girl I love, she’s in trouble. Done something crazy -- vanished from school — pretty sure she’s just dropped out.”

“Oh, wow.”

He sat back in his chair contemplating the consequences of his overwhelming desire to speak the truth, at the cost of his own brother’s happiness and for what? Had it helped this girl, this truth-telling exercise? Was she now better off? Definitely not.

“Just today, I’ve found out she’s working in a strip club in Pensacola, Frank’s, with another girl from our school -- you might remember her, Daphne Paugh?”

Jamison was speechless. My brother was actually a really good person, and it pained him, I know, to consider his actions might have caused this. I gave him a second longer to linger in it before I made my play.

“Aster is one of the smartest kids at our school, editor of the school paper. Teachers, her mother -- people are upset. I am — I’m beyond upset, but my mission is clear. Somebody has to talk to her. I should be the one. But the problem is the only way I know to contact her is at work.”

“But, Geoffrey, you — “

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I’m not 21. I can’t get in. I know. At first, I was going to try to get a fake ID, then I realized the answer was simple. I could just use yours. I could pass as you — maybe bleach my hair or wear - I don’t know, a hat. Just need it tonight.”

“Not tonight. No.”

I was ready to pounce on him, but he spoke again quick, “You don’t know what nights she works, right?”

“No. I just found this out today.”

“You can’t even call and ask because I bet you don’t even know her name — you know they have fake dancer names?”

Did not know that, and I certainly didn’t know hers. Glad my brother was walking me through this world after all — a little surprised at the depth of his knowledge.

“So she’s young, and she’s new, certainly on nightshift -- definitely going to be there on the weekend. That’s when you wanna make your move. Go tomorrow night -- Friday night.”

The logic seemed sound.

“Okay.”

“Nightshift starts at 8:00. You’ll want to get there after that. You don’t have the financial resources to stay in a place like that too long. I’ll give you my ID after school tomorrow. Alyssa and I are just watching movies anyway, won’t need it.”

“Thank you, Jamison.”

"No problem. Control yourself, okay, if things don't go the way you planned? They'll throw you out on your head if you lose it in there."

I nodded. I would do nothing to jeopardize my illegal reunion with Aster Price.

O-

When I pulled into the driveway Friday, after school, and didn't see Jamison's car, I felt an actual, physical pain of doubt. Was my brother betraying me again?

"Calm down. He's never here this early on a Friday." I said to myself out loud, the truth, but Jamison's loyalty was nothing if not questionable now. I laid down on my bed, tried to clear my head and repeat the mantra I'd constructed with this whole night in mind: You possess all the power you require. But I couldn't shake the reality that power without access was useless. For access, I needed Jamison.

Worried he was at Alyssa's, forsaking his promise and his brother for the pleasures of a female again, but then I heard him walk through the door. When he entered my room, he had a knotted plastic bag in his hand he put into my grateful hands.

"Provisions. Don't open this until you're in the car."

I was grateful and intrigued.

"Okay. Sure."

"Oh, and Mom says dinner's ready."

"I'm right behind you."

We headed off to the pleasant smell of roasted chicken while I whiled away the time before the most adult encounter of my young life.

KURT KLINE
is listening to *Lithium* by Nirvana in 2012

Mr. Camp was winding down, predictably, and happily, early.

"Okay. We've got ten minutes left, but if there aren't any more questions, I'm ready to call it. See you guys Thursday."

I was out of my seat to Blondie quick. As soon as I was close, I knew I was right. She was indeed very young.

“Hey, do you have a minute?”

She looked a little startled and so radiantly happy. When she smiled and those gray eyes gleamed, Blondie didn't seem like a compromise at all. She seemed like a very fun game.

“Sure.”

“Wait here. I need to talk to Mr. Camp. He'll walk with us, too.”

“Okay.”

She laughed. There were no other students in here, and I was done playing with this joker.

“Hey, Mr. Comedian, follow me out to the pasture. Nolan's got your pot.”

“What the” --

He stood behind Blondie and made a screwed up face and motioned at her like I'd just told the best kept secret in the universe, and he was ruined forever.

“You look like you're on heroin, dude. Nobody here remotely think's you're straight edge, so get over yourself. Now, let's boogie 'cause Nolan's not going to wait all day.”

Camp rolled his eyes but started walking like the bitch he obviously was.

“To the pasture, my little lady.”

She giggled. It was fucking adorable. It sounded like love.

“You do know she's jailbait, son?”

Camp laughing like he got one over on me, old man cockblock. I knew she looked young, but underage hadn't occurred to me as a possibility.

She blushed and nodded her head.

“I'm 17.”

“Dual enrollment. Shut down.” Camp the Comedian kept on laughing.

“Okay. Old man, keep walking to your illegal drugs and leave me to my perfectly legal conversation.”

She looked at Camp and laughed. My repartee was definitely winning me points. Should keep this fool around all day.

“What's the pasture?”

“It’s just behind this building here, what we call these woods behind the English offices.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s green, and we go there to graze.”

I brought my two fingers to my lips mimicking a joint, just in case my young virtuous seeming friend didn’t fully get my meaning.

“You’re funny.” She laughed, but it was nervous laughter, and it sounded like foreplay to my dick.

“I’m Kurt. And Goldilocks over here is the man of the hour, my buddy Nolan. Now, we can finally send this ancient loser on his way.”

Camp quickly pushed money into Nolan’s shirt pocket, grabbed the folder and started to walk away.

“I’d think twice about going off to the woods with these two, Avalon.”

Nolan was all over it now.

“Hey, you can get your skunk weed some place else next time, Camp. Don’t mess with my boy.”

Camp walked away, talking under his breath as he did. I didn’t care one bit, just happy to see that fucker get smaller and smaller and farther away. We were on the edge of the woods, the three of us. Everybody was quiet. Her hair was blowing in the breeze. I could hear Phish in my head. I wanted to sing it to her.

“Going to come burn one with us, Avalon?”

Her little body was shaking now just like her hair. She looked like an angel, and I wanted to pull off her wings and pull out my magnifying glass.

“I don’t think I can today.”

I touched her cheek, and she shivered. I liked this game.

“I’ll try again Thursday. Okay?”

She smiled.

“Okay.”

I saw it in her eyes right before she turned and scampered on back to the safety of comedians and desks and doors and walls. She wanted me to pull her back here. It was plain as day in those big gray eyes.

She looked like a fawn we'd run across, Big Daddy and me, back in the day, shooting in woods far thicker than this in Alabama. In Alabama, he was truly happy. The gleam he got of joy when he'd hear a sound and know he'd found her, waiting, ready. He'd look straight into those eyes and never blink. My father was a demon. He is alive inside this game. He lives inside me. When I close my eyes and listen, I can hear him in all the little noises of the woods. He spoke to me today.

I turned and bounced off into the pasture with Nolan, as excited with the possibilities of Pensacola as I'd ever been. I am death, but this game feels like life to me. Won't bother with love anymore. I know who I am. I am a demon. I am begotten of a demon. We have this game, and it will be enough.