

PENELOPE

by

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A THESIS

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Approved:

A solid black rectangular box redacting the signature of Prof. Paul Peppis.

Prof. Paul Peppis

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## An Abstract of the Thesis of

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Title: PENELOPE

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Marriage in America is a threatened ideal. Many young Americans, such as myself, grew up in broken homes, realized the majority of our friends grew up similarly, and searched for the model of a healthy marriage to counter our fears and pessimism. Divorce rates, however, continue to remain high in our country, and the rigid definition of family as a nuclear unit - one man, one woman, 2.5 children and a dog - is no longer viable. The word "family" is broadening, finding meaning beyond the strict definition of bloodlines, and the maintenance of "family values" is a hot issue in today's political arena.

In Penelope, I chose to address these issues through the journey of a young woman. Recently married, after only a three-

month courtship, she finds herself abandoned by her husband, and must struggle to overcome her situation. Whether she will overcome her situation within the marriage or without it, is a central question I leave unanswered. Her story is a journey of self, not a handbook for marriage. I believe there is no such handbook, and ultimately, the course of a marriage is defined by the paths of self that are taken or not taken by husbands and wives.

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## INTRODUCTION

## I

In a work of this length, one immediate concern is over what genre the work aspires to: that of the novella or the novel. It was my original intention to create a novel from this story. After some discussion with my colleagues, it was concluded that a novel would be too ambitious. Following that conclusion, I pared down the scope of what I had originally envisioned, and attempted to focus the story on one main character, that of Penelope. I recast the narrative to be eighty pages, ninety at most, and I was warned that writing beyond that limit would threaten the scope of the novella form. Analyzing the one-hundred and sixty-six pages that I ended up with, I must conclude that either I have moved beyond the novella form, or it is far more flexible than I was previously led to believe.

All of this categorization ultimately comes down to semantics, and my purpose behind this thesis was not to create a discussion of literary forms. My purpose was simply to write an effective story. The story I have written will have to stand a test of success independent of what category it falls into. It cannot be ignored, however, that stories themselves may have essential forms. Though I tried to reconceptualize *Penelope* into a shorter length, a shorter form, I was not able to. Indeed, I ended up adding to my original vision of the story rather than shortening it. Perhaps this is my failing as a writer, or perhaps the story could be successfully written

only one way -- perhaps there are essential forms in writing. I am still undecided as to the validity of this idea, but it illustrates my suspicion of post-modern theory's "non-essentialist" approach. This brings me deeper into a discussion of *Penelope's* place among literary genres.

## II

As stated above, my literary affiliations do not extend to post-modernism. I am not a deconstructionist, and do not believe that the whole of a story is reducible to the sum of its social, cultural and economic parts. A Marxist interpretation of *Penelope* might be amusing, but I believe, ultimately misleading. Though I do have an agenda in *Penelope* - that of the decay of marriage and family in American society - my larger agenda is to create a compelling story. If the primary intention of my story was to impart a social lesson or explore a cultural issue, I believe it would appear heavy-handed and contrived. The genre of the essay and the larger realm of non-fiction exist to satisfy such agenda's. Fiction's primary orientation must be to entertain, to storytell. The education that it imparts is dependent upon the success, (i.e. the entertainment), of the telling.

What then is the genre in which *Penelope* unfolds? Is it modernist? Does it speak of alienation, change, the fall of traditions and the rise of new perspectives? Does it seek to represent the subjectivity of experience, and does so by bringing the reader

intimately close to the minds of the characters? I must answer yes to all of the above questions. I am hesitant, however, to therefore ascribe my work as a modernist one. Modernism was a genre born out of a specific time period, a time of unique change in the western world. It relates the psychic and more fundamental costs of what happens when countries undergo rapid change, when the traditional religion, science and society all becomes delegitimized. It relates the experience of adjusting to the modern world. Though Penelope's situation mirrors these elements -- her past is shown to be flawed, her present is one of alienation, and her future is fearfully undetermined -- I do not regard such surface congruency as the real test of meaning in her tale. And perhaps it is anachronistic to regard a story which is written in and takes place in the 1990's as a modernist one. It may contain and reflect modernist elements, but the true reign of modernism belongs to a different time.

Building upon the previous point, I believe Penelope contains some classic elements, though I do not believe I wrote in the classic genre. This may be indicative of the current literary arena. No one genre leads the field. Rather, there are a variety of present and past genres which each author may chose from and build upon. This is current literature's most distinctive element -- the smorgasbord of genres that are legitimate to work with. I see myself as working within a variety of traditions simultaneously, and consider the contrasts that they create within my work as part of its meaning. My emphasis on the classic virtue of loyalty, for example, I see placed up against the reality of loyalty in a flawed marriage. I do

not want to sacrifice the necessity of believing in such virtues in order to present their reality. Both are essential to her experience. Nor do I want to confine myself to one genre. In an age of budding internationalism, literature is seeking to reflect diversity. I suppose this is my work's classification, and perhaps the classification that future literary critics will ascribe to us.

### III

Taking a cue from Toni Morrison, everything that I wrote in Penelope is there for a reason. Almost everything is a symbol. Classically, a character's name is a prime symbol of their characterization. For instance, Mott is named for his motley coat of fur. The horse Nettie is named for her prickly nature; trying to ride her is just like throwing yourself into a briar of nettles. Not all of the character's names are symbolic, but the main character, Penelope, holds a name of important literary reference. She stands, of course, for the famed wife of *The Odyssey*, the wife left home alone to fend for herself. Penelope's story is the story of the one left behind, the equally noble exploration that such characters must take as they deal with their abandonment. I always felt that Ulysses' wife was at least as interesting as him, if not more. She faced her situation bravely, cleverly, and never betrayed her love: that was the true courage in the story. Ulysses only had to find his way home; she had to keep it intact.

Penelope Pennyroyal is not the Penelope of *The Odyssey*. Her story does not exist to showcase the valor of her husband -- quite the opposite. I envision Penelope Pennyroyal as a modern-day incarnation of her Greek predecessor. She is still loyal, still courageous, and still clever, but with a modern spin that shows how such virtues have changed in meaning and application since ancient times. She becomes a feminist, a fighter, and an active chooser of her fate; she is a version of the wife Ulysses never knew he'd married. Jack is equally unaware of the real woman he's married until the end, and then, it may be too late. He will have to learn how to tend the fire that she kept alive while he was gone. He will have to learn how to build from his own ashes. For, Penelope has to embark on her own Odyssey. She has to leave the place that her counterpart never did. Ulysses got the chance to learn that home, his wife and family, were more precious to him than the secrets of the world. Homer assumed that Ulysses' wife felt the same way. Perhaps she did. Perhaps she only pretended. Penelope Pennyroyal creates her own chance. She decides that she needs the same test as Ulysses. Her limited experience, her limited dreams, her limited self -- they are not enough anymore. Certainly, they are not enough to help her evaluate the future of her marriage. And so, she finds the courage to leave. I think her predecessor would have approved.

#### IV

Any discussion of this work must return to its origins: its

genesis as an idea in my head, and its genesis as a work from my hand. Both were born from the same desire -- the desire for courage. As an excited student contemplating my future novel, I searched my heart for what I most wanted to say. Almost immediately I had my answer. I wanted to write about courage. What would be the perfect story of courage?, I asked myself. An orphaned child? A soldier's selfless act? At last, I settled on a simple girl. A girl whose husband leaves her. A girl whose world is shattered. From there, I began to contemplate the need for courage in marriage -- the immense bravery it takes to love and live with your spouse well. This led me, in turn, to contemplate the troubled status of marriage in America, and the admiration I felt for friends who were making the leap nonetheless. But looking back, I still don't know why I chose this girl. Perhaps I chose her because she in many ways reminds me of myself. This, I felt, was a wise idea for creating my first major character. But, she is ultimately not me, and her experience is assuredly not my own. Why then, this girl? This is a question which intrigues me, for so much of the story I crafted with care, choosing elements directly related to the aims of the story. Perhaps she came from the spark of inspiration that knew she would tell the tale I wanted. She is alive to me now, and somehow, I can't ascribe her birth solely to my own head and hands.

As I look back on this process, I realize that I did something much greater than write a story. I managed to combat my fears and write the novel I'd been planning since age 10. It took me fourteen

years, but I did it. I suspect that's the real reason I wanted to write about courage.

# PART I:

OCTOBER

## Chapter 1

Crushing, with two balled fists, the veil of sleep which laid across his eyes, Jack returned to the reality from which his dreams had fled late last night. It was early, around six, and dawn would soon have a stained October sky to contend with. These past weeks had been full of the new season and Jack had watched it arrive with a sense of finality. An Oregon summer's sweet, dry denial had been pushed aside. This darker display was the coming fall.

For a few, stolen moments Jack watched his reflection in the living room window. His face was gathering, like the clouds, preparing for the storm, and he could see the faintest, retreating blue in his watery eyes. His clothes had bunched up tight around his frame while he slept. A rack of a man stretched to six feet four and twisted around that armchair in an absurd curl. With a mother's quilt tucked up to his chin, he looked like an oversized child, his eyes and skin still lingering in boyhood. It was his tough, thickened hair and his long, tired bones that bore the mark of a man, though he was in truth only twenty-four.

Pushing the pale quilt away, Jack rose from his curl and moved slowly into the kitchen. His feet padded against the cold floor and he shivered in response, wishing the quilt were still around him. He was glad for his drowsiness, considering what he had next to do, glad to be tired, straining to stay numb.

He remembered vaguely that there were now writing materials in the bread box and he moved toward it to get pen and paper. Penelope. She had made it her home so quickly. He still moved as if

the cement was wet. Four or five pages of note paper and a straight black pen were sufficient, he thought, and clutching them with both hands he sat down to the kitchen table. His glasses he put on tight to the eyes. His knees scraped against the bottom of the table. Then slowly, gingerly, he uncapped the pen.

How could he explain? He couldn't. He knew he couldn't. It wasn't long before Jack decided not to try. Fingers liberally shaking, his eyes an even fainter blue, he lowered the straight, black pen to write:

I'm sorry, Penelope.

I don't know how to explain,

but I have to go.

I'm sorry.

Jackson.

And then, scrawled across the bottom, as if in haste or indecision, he wrote:

I'll try to come back.

It, whatever it was, ended cruelly there and he knew he shouldn't have written that last line but he would not take it back. He felt that he could not. Jack leaned back in his chair, ran two hands through his hair, and sighed. She'll find this in a few hours, he thought. She'll find it with her hair tousled, her eyes still sleepy, her feet bare. She'll pick it up and hold it to her breast. This dead, white piece of paper would receive her in ways he no longer could. How

strange it felt to care and still to leave. Like a hollow stomach. Like a punch coming when you least expect it.

Leaving his words board-flat upon the table, Jack decided to check all the windows to make sure the winds wouldn't blow through if a storm hit. Normally, it was something he'd do while she was looking on, something proprietary and proud. This time he did it alone. The hinges squeaked loudly through the quiet of the house.

Once the latches were shut tight, Jack stood at a loss in the middle of the kitchen: his eyebrows furrowed, his hands on his hips. There was no more time to waste. There was nothing left to do. Knowing he shouldn't but unable to resist, Jack spared a glance through the kitchen and living room to the bed where his new wife lay sleeping. The door was slightly ajar, as if she had left it open for him last night, and probably she had. He could feel her even from here, that soft warmth, that small, dreaming face pressed half into the bed, that caught breathing of hers which kept him up at night checking to see if she was all right. If only he could have watched her last night, one last time for the slow, hard time to come. She deserved more than this jagged edge of a beginning. Jack turned sharply away and fled towards the back door. These taloned thoughts were what had consumed him since the moment he brought her here.

One, lone hook held his coat against the far wall. It hung limp, guilty, like the skin of a hound caught misbehaving. He pulled it towards him and stuck his arms through quickly, but the buttons refused to close. His boots as well refused to fit; bunching at the toe

and dislodging the heel. He struggled to right them with more violence than necessary.

Having finally beaten them down, he reached at last for his old, battered hat, the one that had a cracked back-brim. Here on the Pacific, all hats showed the wounds of coastal warfare. Jack placed it squarely on his head, like a soldier, and started through the door, but he swung the door open too quickly and staggered slightly in the wind. Rain and wind met and blew sharply into his face. "A storm, of course a storm," he muttered under his breath.

After waiting at the door a few more precious seconds, his back turned to his sleeping wife, his feet pointing to the crest of the hill, Jack finally stepped beyond the door. Water in coarse, angry sheets fell and pooled at his feet as he limped numbly into the morning of October fourth. He had little idea of where to go but down.

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## Chapter 2

Penelope was dreaming of dancing ladies. Lovely, robust ladies in colorful costumes of red, white and green. They were stomping their feet, slowly at first, but faster and faster as the dance went on. The sounds of pounding were growing louder, more piercing and unruly -- the individual feet of each dancer were beginning to stray from the whole, small pitter-patters intersecting with others, and then more and more, until the ladies began to fall away and there was left only the pounding, only the movement of feet upon the ground.

Penelope awoke to the sound of driving rain and it took her a moment or two before she could erase the feeling that there were ladies above her making dents in the roof. The small room where she lay was cold and still despite such imagined movement, and even the sounds of the coming storm weren't enough to move the air along the ceiling or stir the dust from the floorboards. The warmth of the bed beckoned her to linger, but Penelope was too excited to stay under the covers. She wanted to experience a full-blown coastal storm. The first from atop her new home. Here, on the hillside, it promised to be dramatic, and she remained only long enough to hug Jack's pillow and put it to her mouth for a cottony kiss. He must be out helping Benjamin prepare for the storm, she said to herself, and then set to the task of making it out of bed and over to her slippers without touching her toes to the cold floorboards in between.

Lifting her nightgown up to her knees and balancing herself on the bed-frame, Penelope sprung past the vanity that reigned over

the west wall. Its mirror hung slightly to the side, neither Jack nor Penelope having noticed its tilt nor cared enough to make it more useful. If Penelope had stopped in front of the gilt-edged glass, she would have seen nothing peculiar. She had a medium height, a regular weight, and a normal disposition. At least in company. Hers was a perfectly nice, plain arrangement. A mirror held nothing of the beauty in her -- its own flat vision flattened her in turn. In a crowd or room full of strangers, one had to catch Penelope's eyes to see her at all. Otherwise, her energy curled inside and her charm turned inward as she delved into a quiet but fantastical imagination. It was only on close observation that her plainness would begin to seem unusual and then, if one looked even closer, would turn into the softest magnificence.

Penelope's girlish white nightgown, full about her ankles and scalloped at the edge, obscured her feet as she leaned over to pull on her slippers. They fit loosely, but were warm, an inheritance wheedled from her father. She thought of him as she put them on: of his short glasses on an even shorter frame, of his neat accountant's haircut, nipped above the ears evenly on both sides, of his wistful gaze whenever he thought of her mother, now resting peaceful in the grave as he called it, and lastly, of his sweet, hapless dependency on her, his only child, his Penelope. He was the only thing she missed, being now a wife in a place not so far away in miles, but far enough for all its strange dissimilarity, and she missed him, in that way of missing which doesn't ache, but tenderly reminds one of old memories. She expected that he would call soon, and she only hoped

it would come when she knew what to say. It wouldn't do for him to think she was anything less than capable.

When Jack met her father for the first time, he had been uncharacteristically nervous. An accountant father was a conservative father, a father not likely to give up his daughter to a no-account like him.

"P-Pleased to meet you, sir. Very pleased to meet you. Sir." Jack's deep voice shouted out the moment he stepped through the door. Her father had for once seemed the bigger man. He took Jack's sweaty palm securely in his and welcomed him into their home, the smoothest of hosts. Penelope set to preparing dinner - her usual tactic for diffusing tense situations. And she had gauged the mood correctly, for by the end of his second helping of pasta salad, Jack had managed to unclamp his fixed smile. Soon, even his jeans began to loosen their hold and a slight sag in the hip showed as he bent over the Monopoly game Penelope had persuaded them into playing. Jack won fair and square though she would have played to let him win had he struggled.

For all the nervous energy of the evening, Penelope would never forget the calm look in her father's eye as he said 'Good Night' to the boy that was dating his daughter. He had raised his arm above his head to pat Jack on the shoulder and she breathed a sigh of relief. Her dad had accepted him. She had chosen well.

Penelope hurried out to the living room window, slapping the heels of her slippers against the wood floor and barely avoiding the

hem of her nightgown as she flung herself across the room. Looking at the rain through the window, her face seemed to be cupped into the glass, like a bodiless reflection, and she could see the raindrops trail down her cheeks like tears. It was raining precisely the sort of rain she had envisioned: full, but still holding back, leaving enough of a reserve for the storm to come.

Dawn had made its way through the wet and dark but Penelope could still feel the presence of night. Night as a mood more than the calculation of time. The day only promised to get darker as it wore on, and Penelope began to worry about where Jack could be, doing whatever it was that Benjamin thought needed doing in such weather. If Benjamin had his way they'd all be out there working from dawn to dusk.

Penelope hoped Jack had remembered to take his long coat and not the light one he thought sufficient to withstand anything nature could throw at him. Why did he persist in thinking he could just ignore the weather? She'd caught him with two colds already and it was only October.

Feeling a shiver suddenly crawl up her back, Penelope grabbed a quilt from off the armchair and wrapped it about herself. She held it tight under her chin with one hand, snuggling her hips into its warmth, and with the other hand she maneuvered the fire poker through last night's ashes. After some doing, she managed to add wood to the fire and get it going, its warm, orange glaze filling up the glass window of the wood stove. A familiar mewing sound startled Penelope out of her dazed fire-watching, and she moved to open the front door. There he was, her Mott of many colors and dubious

textures. The fine, vain tabby slid proudly through the door, giving no indication of any upset at the dousing he had received.

“Mott, oh my Mott, you poor darling! Oh, you must be so cold. Come here and I’ll wipe you off a bit.”

Penelope scurried over to the basket of towels she had placed near the door and promptly scooped Mott up into one of the thicker ones. She rubbed his ears back and forth with a playful motion, barely managing to finish off his paws before he squirmed free and sauntered, newly dignified, to the armchair by the fire. What a king he was, she thought, what a proud, gluttonous king. She wouldn't have separated him from her father, but Jack had taken to him and she so wanted to hold on to anything that made Jack smile. She smiled herself thinking of the incongruous pair they made: her tall, bony husband with a mischievous glint in his eye, and her absurd, gargantuan cat in his arms, wriggling to get free from his daily regimen of teasing.

"Now, where's our Jack, huh Mott? Did you chase him away cause of all that teasing?"

The image of a good, hot cup of tea came suddenly to Penelope and mobilized her to enter the kitchen. The dream that she'd had earlier this morning returned, and newly reminded of those gay, dancing ladies, she began to hum a familiar tune.

“On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me,  
a partridge in a pear tree.

On the second day of Christmas, my true love gave to me,  
two turtle doves, and a partridge in a pear tree.”

Suddenly, the room was brighter. Her father, an accountant gifted with a surprisingly good singing voice, had taught her that any time of year was a good time of year for a Christmas carol, and Penelope, who unfortunately did not share in her father's gift, nevertheless swung herself and the quilt into the rhythm of the song.

"On the third day of Christmas, my true love gave to me,  
three French hens, two turtle doves,  
and a partridge in a pear tree.

On the fourth day of Christmas, my true love gave to me,  
four calling birds, three French hens, two turtle doves,  
and a partridge in a pear tree."

Penelope skipped over to where Mott was happily curled and dreaming in his soft armchair.

"C'mon Mott, it's no time to be sleeping! Come sing with me, dance with me!"

Swinging the fat and groggy cat up into her arms, she twirled around the room, his front paws held in her hands like the frame of a waltz, and his girth held up under her left elbow.

"On the fifth day of Christmas, my true love gave to me,  
five golden rings!"

"Oh, I'd like to have that, Mott. How about you?" she giggled while twirling around the armchair. Changing to a different but equally off-tune key, Penelope sang:

"On the sixth day of Christmas, my true love gave to me,  
six geese a-laying, five golden rings, four calling birds,  
three French hens, two turtle doves, and a partridge in  
a pear tree!"

Penelope's voice was high and giddy, breathless from the twirling and the significant weight of Mott.

"Let's dance back to the kitchen, huh Mott? Let's take all our hens and chickens and rings and birds and fly away into the kitchen! C'mon Mott, keep going, we're only to the seventh day! Okay, we'll skip ahead a little, all right? And I'll put you down here on the kitchen table. There you go."

"On the ninth day of Christmas, my true love gave to me,  
nine ladies dancing...."

Penelope's voice trailed off. She noticed the paper that was lying on the table. Immediately, she was filled with dread. Something *was* wrong. She read it quickly. I'm sorry. I can't explain. I have to go. I'll try to come back. She stared at it and it stared blankly back at her. She picked it up and then put it down again, leaning over it and then turning away. Suddenly, she thought to check the coat hook by the door. It was bare, bare, but the door

whistled, slightly ajar, and she ran to it, flinging it open, searching for something, she didn't know what, but something, someone. There was nothing, no one. She turned to go back inside, but her legs buckled and she crumpled in a heap on the outside step, rain overflowing from the gutter onto her bent head. Mott jumped down from his perch on the kitchen table and rubbed up against her back, mewling with a confused urgency. At the soft touch Penelope broke down, letting the water wash over her in thick streams. She never thought he'd actually leave her. She never thought he'd go without saying good-bye.

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## Chapter 3

Ben figured he'd given her enough time and he decided to leave his cabin to go see if she was okay. The storm had raged all day and looked as if it would continue on through tomorrow. Dusk had fallen some time ago to no one's notice, and even the moon had curled itself into the arm of the sky to wait out the long, wet night. Ben had seen many storms just like this one and he knew the routine. On with his grey, fisherman's cap pulled low over his ears, on with his knee-high black rubber boots, on with his leather and sheepskin gloves worn tight over callused hands, and finally, on with the rain slicker that he, for the second time this day, was regretting not having taken the time to mend after Nettie took her hoof to it last week. Why he ever thought to buy a horse like her he'd never know. The rain slicker would have to do for now, tear or no, but he gathered some needle and thread before dashing into the rain.

It wasn't far to the house. The small, white-washed cabin sat just far enough away that you had to prepare for a walk to it through the rain, but near enough that you could see the outline of someone reading by candlelight in the front window of the living room. That was an outline he had once known well, and one that he still looked for every so often when he was thinking about the past. But things had changed so much since those days. Elizabeth was long gone by now.

Penelope was wound into the armchair by the fire, her back a curved C. Both knees touched a pale, tired forehead and her blond

hair trailed limply over the sides of the quilt. Mott was curled into her in a circle of his own, both of them safe in the keep of dreams.

Ben rid himself of his coat, hat, gloves and boots as he entered. With slow care, so as not to wake her, he laid them in a pile by the door and dried himself off with a towel from Penelope's wicker basket. That wise idea succeeded in getting him covered in musty cat hair.

Ben's own hair, peppered gray and curly, was getting sparser as the years wore on. With the light coming in from the window it shone like a crown of the moon against the darkness of his face. His eyes were brown, like two, melting chocolate candies and once it had been said that no girl within a mile was immune from their spell. Ben claimed to have long forgotten such silliness, but if you endeavored to comment upon his long lashes, for a moment, just a moment, you would swear you saw him make them flutter.

Standing in the middle of Penelope's living room, Ben looked every bit his fifty-five years. The old days were as far away as Louisiana. In fact, he hadn't thought about that place in years. Why was he suddenly thinking about it now?

As Ben moved towards Penelope, his cable-knit sweater shining in the moonlight, he seemed like an old bear walking on its hind paws. Mott was asleep on Penelope's lap, curled into a ball that took up most of the chair. He picked up the tabby with care, trying not to wake Penelope. Mott awoke slowly in Ben's arms, fixing his gaze upon one of the *other* males in his mistress's life, and then stretched his front paws arrogantly against Ben's chest. Ben let out a low rumble of a laugh, envying the simple emotions of a housecat,

and tried to throw Mott out for the night, but the tabby characteristically refused and sauntered back into Penelope's lap. Ben shook his head, still chuckling. He sobered quickly at the sight of a piece of paper on the kitchen table.

"Ah, Jack," he thought, "didn't you *tell* her good-bye? Didn't you have the courage to do at least that?"

The note was what he should have expected. Reading it, he understood what Jack was trying to say, but he knew Penelope didn't understand, and he wasn't sure if he should now be the one to make it clear.

"Ah, Jack, boy, you had a real chance here. A real chance. What do you have now?"

Ben folded the note and tucked it into the pocket of his pants, thinking it best to put it out of Penelope's sight. There were upturned dishes on the kitchen counter, a teacup and its saucer with a chip on the rim. Ben cleaned up, doing his best to make the kitchen look innocent. The box of tissues still had a few left, and Ben took the box and a cup full of warm water into the living room.

Kneeling down at her side, Ben carefully lifted Penelope's head from its contorted position and cradled it in the crook of his shoulder. Gently, Ben washed the tear tracks from her face, lightly skimming over her cheeks, under her eyes and around her mouth. At the light touch, Penelope opened her eyes and looked into Ben's, taking stock of his position and the wet tissue in his hands. Without breaking the stare, fresh tears marked their way down her face, wetting Ben's hand as it rested against her cheek. After several more moments,

Penelope's eyes quietly closed and she surrendered to Ben's ministrations.

It wasn't long since Penelope came here with Jack. They came in June, having married after only three months of courtship. It was raining the day she came, a light rain, the kind that can fall for days and still not make much of an impression. She was wearing her wedding dress from the day before, and as she appeared over the crest of the hill, she took on the aspect of a soft, pale ghost, vague and insubstantial, her hair trailing over her back in wet disarray. To Ben's eyes, Jack had looked uneasy, but was managing to hide it from his bride. Or perhaps she just didn't want to see, and he kept her from looking too closely.

They had come up from town on Nettie's broad back, the road not yet re-graveled since April's mudslide. Coming over the rise in such an antiquated manner, Penelope seemed almost ethereal, like a vision of the past. Jack looked more like a man gifted with something he didn't understand, having traveled to a place he couldn't hold on to. It was when Ben looked Penelope full in the face that he also traveled to the past, to a woman in a yellow dress listening to him play the harmonica on her front porch. She had a ribbon in her hair. She was smiling. Her dress was lifted enough that he could see her ankles, and he was entranced. Elizabeth, Elizabeth. Penelope, unaware of the similarity, looked disturbingly like her. Jack must've seen the resemblance. He must have.

Ben snapped out of his reverie to the sound of Penelope's deep, caught breathing. Lifting her like a child, he carried her wrapped within the quilt to her cold and quiet bed. She turned restlessly as he arranged her under the covers and he knelt on one knee by the side of the bed until she was once again asleep.

Ben left her door slightly open so that he could hear her if she cried out during the night. He latched shut the front and kitchen doors, stirred the fire, and then gathered up the slicker he had laid in a pile by the window. With his raincoat in hand, he returned to the armchair where Penelope had been asleep and watched the fire as it leaped into strong, new flames. He positioned Mott, after a short territorial dispute, so that the tabby was sprawled over his thighs, and then he set to the task of mending his coat while waiting out the storm. The long, slow movements of the needle and thread took Ben back to a time when he was still a boy, back to Louisiana. A time when Letty had been the one to do such mending for him.

*"Girl, have you got my pants sewn up yet?"*

*"I'm not one of your girls, I'm your wife! You'd better start treating me nice or you're gonna find yourself on the front step one of these days and no one to let ya in!"*

*The woman who had responded was sitting in an armchair in the middle of the front room. She wasn't a day over eighteen, but a toddler squirmed at her feet and newborn twin girls sucked their thumbs in a bassinet nearby. Letitia Eleanore Jenkins Langely, Letty to everyone in town but her mother and the preacher, was small, just a little over five feet. Her voice, however, could be heard across the*

*whole state of Louisiana when she got riled, and these days, that was a more and more frequent occurrence.*

*Ben sidled up to his wife with a pacifying smile. He'd had a smooth, confident way about him in those days, and had practiced his moves so that he could pass for twenty-one when he needed to.*

*"Letty, honey, you know you're my only girl, don't you?"*

*"I don't know any such thing. I knew before I married ya you'd kissed every girl in our class." Letty's voice was a deep pout.*

*Ben paused before answering, trying to gauge the depth of her anger.*

*"Well you know, it's not hard to kiss all the girls when you and Lyle Claymore are the only two boys in school old enough to try. Remember those buck teeth Lyle had? Poor boy didn't stand a chance!" Ben's teasing, as he had estimated, quickly diffused Letty's anger. She hadn't been seriously upset with him this time. She was just frustrated, and tired.*

*"And if we're really gonna be specific, we can't count Heather Bell as an actual kiss 'cause we grazed teeth more than anything else. That leaves out her sister too." Letty erupted into a peal of laughter, acceding to his charm.*

*"Okay, I give. Maybe you aren't such a terrible, awful, mean ole nasty husband."*

*Ben leaned down from behind the chair in which Letty was sewing and snuggled his cheek up against hers.*

*"Now, don't go flatterin' me too much. I might get an even bigger head than the one I've got."*

*Letty indulged in Ben's affection for as long as she trusted herself to.*

*"You're not gonna be home too late, are you? You know, Dad told me he could use ya tomorrow if you're out there early enough this time." Letty ventured onto the subject of money carefully. It was a sore spot and she hated to bring it up, but the house was looking worse and worse lately, and the grocery was starting to refuse her any more credit.*

*"Well, you see honey, Carter's letting me play after his set if I pull in enough tips for him at the bar. This is my first big opportunity. I've been learning some new songs and I mean, well it's not Bourbon Street, but it's somethin'. If it gets real, real late I'll come home, okay?. I know we could use the money."*

*"We do need the money, Ben. We really do. But, I know my big brother. He's not gonna give you this chance again if you don't take it. Just try to not come home too late."*

*"Anything you say, babe. You know, I do miss sleeping next to you all night. I'll always miss that!" Ben did a mock-leer and playfully bit her neck.*

*"I miss you too, Bennie," Letty said, and stifled back an unexpected tear as she watched him head across the room to shine his harmonica, forgetting to greet his children as he passed.*

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## Chapter 4

It was well into the middle of the night when Penelope woke from inside her cocoon. She wanted to feel tired, to feel heavy, to feel in her hands and head and bones the weight of confusion and loss that was crushing her heart, but she only felt cold. Frighteningly awake. The bed was no comfort, a straight, flat board on wire strings that gave no lift or sag. She imagined that she was lying on that very kitchen table she now despised - his pen dripping not onto a piece of paper but her own skin, staining her like a tattoo. Mostly, she just felt cold.

The vanity mirror wanted to see how she was doing, if her skin was still wet with ink, if four thousand tiny wrinkles had appeared overnight, and she obeyed its call, looking for some drama as well. As always, there was nothing particular to look at, that same nose, those same ears, and she wished that there was at least a ravage or two to show how much she was a victim. A line or track or hollow under the eye, even more if she could accomplish it, would give her the perfect face to show Jack when he returned. The face of a martyr, of a loyal wife spurned! But, no. That wasn't how she really felt. That would be an easy way to lie to herself, an easy way to feel, but a lie just the same. She really felt much like she looked: plain and unremarkable. Mostly, she just felt cold.

The quilt on top of her bed had shifted to Jack's side while she slept. It lay there looking far more comfortable than she, and as if seeing it for the first time, she realized that the pale, faded colors had once formed an elaborate pattern. An entire community had

once thrived here, and the birds and trees and colorful people were still smiling on their quilted plain. As she wrapped the blanket around her, Penelope was suddenly filled with an intense sadness

Ben was reading by the fire, slumped deep into his chair, his eyes at half-mast. Mott had long since given up the fight for adequate space and was now ensconced in the basket of towels by the door. The storm continued, but with a shuttered intensity, having spent most of its power in the first hours of the night and wanting still to produce a show at daybreak. As anyone who has lived in such weather will tell you, the rain is alive and calculating.

Sensing Penelope's approach, Ben laid his book aside, something on naval history, and looked at her softly as she settled into an adjoining chair. The crackle of kindling and the late, quiet hour, lulled the room into a sort of haze. Neither Penelope nor Ben spoke for some time, both listening to the fire, both needing the other to start first. Ben was smoking his pipe and looked like he could do just that all night. Penelope, who was without the benefit of something else to occupy her, began to speak.

"Benjamin, I want to thank you. Thank you for being here, for knowing what I needed last night. If I could remember how to go about it, I would fix you a cup of tea. But that's probably beyond me at the moment. Do, do you want a cup of tea?"

"Ah, Penny, you don't need to be thinking about me. I've been makin' myself tea for a long time now," Ben drawled with a slow, exaggerated air.

"And I'm glad I was here too. But, there isn't really much else to do up here in a rainstorm. I was just looking for a little entertainment."

Ben's gentle humor won Penelope over and she smiled gratefully as he continued.

"You know, I never got to take care of Jack like this. He always tried to be such a little man about everything, even when he was just a boy. So stoic and proud like his father...."

"Jack told me you raised him since he was just a boy. Since he was five or six, I think he said."

Ben shifted in his chair, not sure of how or when to give out the information he knew.

"Yep, since he was about six . Uh, huh..."

"Why were you, I mean, well, how was it that you became his guardian, exactly? Jackson wasn't real full of details."

Ben shifted again, nervously, dragging on his pipe.

"Maybe I should hear what it was Jack did tell you."

"Oh, not a whole heck of a lot. Just that he had grown up here. That he hadn't spent much time here in the last couple of years. That you were here and that you took care of things. He didn't speak at all about his parents, but I got the impression they're not really in the picture, right?"

"Um, you could say that." Ben bit his bottom lip.

Penelope rubbed her hands back and forth, feeling the ridge of each knuckle, the smooth hollows of her palms. She lowered her eyes and watched her hands as if they were foreign objects.

"Ben, I don't know what to do," Penelope said with a catch in her voice.

The quilt had fallen off her shoulders as she sat down. She tugged at one end but it seemed to be caught in the chair or maybe under her legs and it wouldn't give up enough material for her to wrap back around herself. Pulling desperately, ridiculously, she suddenly dropped the edge of the quilt, put her hands to her face, and broke down crying.

"Ben, what should I do?"

Ben leaned over and took Penelope's hands in his.

"Sweetheart, I can't tell you what to do," Ben said softly.

Ben gave Penelope's hands a light squeeze before releasing them and then settling back down into his chair.

"You know, I made a promise to Jack some time ago that I wouldn't speak about his past, to him or anyone else, unless he spoke of it first. I take that kind of promise seriously."

Here, Ben paused, weighing the consequence of his words.

"Still, you deserve to hear about your own husband. I do know some things that might help you, well, understand your situation a little better. I'm in a bind, you see."

Ben paused again and re-lit his pipe.

"You know, Jack's past doesn't excuse or condemn what he did. It explains it some, but his past still isn't to blame. Unfortunately, I don't think Jack knows that."

Penelope had been looking at the flames in the wood stove as they shot across the expanse of each log, weaving their way back and forth in a fiery dance. She heard each word Ben said with a strange

detachment - the kind of detachment that settles in when you realize this is going to take a lot more work than you thought. Penelope rubbed her hands over her face and through her hair.

"Ben, I just want it to be simple. Clear. One way for me to be right and one way for me to be wrong. Can't I have that?"

"No, Penny, I don't think you can. Not with marriage anyways."

Penelope turned away to look out the window. Through the darkness streaks of silver rain, fell like bullets onto the wounded ground.

"Well, it doesn't look like Jack will be coming home anytime soon. At least, I have time. And the rain. All winter long I have the rain, right by my side."

Ben looked at her shadowy face in the window. He'd done enough for tonight. She could use some time alone. He started to pick up his book and pull himself out of the chair when Penelope interrupted.

"Won't you stay, Ben? Just for tonight? If I know you're out here by the fire, well, I just think..." her voice trailed off.

Ben reassured her with a soft smile and eased himself back into the armchair.

"Whenever you need me to be here Penny, I'll be here. I'm just like the rain. I won't be going nowhere."

Penelope attempted a smile in return, but accomplished only a sad little quiver of her lips as she raised herself from her own chair and set out for the long journey to her bedroom.

"Thanks, Ben," she said hoarsely, and she gripped the quilt tighter, its happy, faded scenes trailing along behind over the cold floor.

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## Chapter 5

*Ben had been drifting from odd-job to odd-job for over a year. In the last two months, as he got farther and farther away from Louisiana and the contacts that had helped him find jobs despite his meager skills, he had been barely managing to make enough to fill his stomach. When he stumbled into Oklahoma on his twenty-fifth birthday, two bucks fifty in his pocket and a shirt on his back worn as thin as his own skin, there was no one for Ben to celebrate with. And he surely wasn't in a celebrating kind of mood.*

*From miles off, Ben had been watching something grow on the horizon. It rose out of the earth and loomed, like a bird, predatory, wings spread wide in a gesture of arrogance and dominion. What he'd been watching from his place along the highway was Pennyroyal Estate, the largest estate in Oklahoma and controlled, managed, and operated by the owner himself, Mr. Jackson Pennyroyal I, a twenty-year émigré from South England and a man determined to lead the Pennyroyals into an American dynasty.*

*This was the kind of place Ben had never stepped foot on, much less a place where he thought he'd find work, but as chance would have it, Mr. Pennyroyal was experiencing labor trouble. Simply put, 'he was an asshole,' and 'nobody wanted to work for that son of a bitch,' as the manager of a local coffee shop had informed Ben when he'd inquired about jobs over a slice of pie. So, Benjamin was in luck. In a manner of speaking. The coffee shop manager gave him directions to the estate and a slice of pie to take on the road. Ben had politely tried to refuse.*

*"You need some meat on your bones, son. Didn't no one ever tell you to swallow your pride if you don't have the money to swallow anything else?"*

*"Thank you, sir. I don't mean to be rude or nothin. I guess I'm just not used to folks bein so nice since I started driftin'."*

*"Well, shoot. That's all right, son. If you can sweet talk like that to the boss-man you've got yourself a job and a piece a pie. Hoo-ee, you could sure use a shower though. Why don't you come on in the back and we'll get you fixed up."*

*Ben left the coffee shop with a new set of clothes he'd borrowed from the skinny, red-haired dishwasher, vowing to come back some day and leave a ten-dollar tip! It must be God takin' pity on his birthday, cause things were sure looking up, and as he headed toward Pennyroyal Estate, he thought to himself:*

*"I'll show you, Letty. You're wrong about me. I can make it on my own, and I don't need you or the kids tellin me I 'aint worth anything."*

*Ben thought he'd left his family behind. He didn't realize they were walking right alongside him and would be, until he made things right some twenty-nine years later.*

*Jackson Pennyroyal I surveyed Benjamin Langely with a contemptuous air. He needed someone desperately but he'd be damned if he'd take on a liar, an incompetent, or a thief. There was always the Pennyroyal reputation to be concerned with, and the*

*young, matted man standing so awkwardly before him was perhaps a risk.*

*"Mr. Pennyroyal, sir, I know that I don't come with a whole lot to recommend me, but I'm a fast learner, I work hard, and I'm reliable. I'll do any kind of honest work and I'll do it well if you give me a chance."*

*Ben's voice was earnest but not pleading, which was his saving grace.*

*"Well, Mr. Langely, I see you still have a modicum of dignity though you are rather desperate. That is commendable. It is indeed true that I am also in some straits and require someone to do menial labor around the estate. But do not think my situation guarantees you a position here. My standards are high and I will not lower them for you or for anyone else. You will be allowed to stay on for a trial period at which time I will assess your performance. If it is unsatisfactory, you will leave post haste and you will do it quietly, is that understood? I have had some trouble in the past over termination disputes and I will not tolerate such business again. If you do prove satisfactory, and let me reiterate Mr. Langely that my standards are quite high, then you will have a bunk in the servant's quarters and your meals will be provided by the kitchen. A small salary will remain for your incidentals and your own, shall we say, amusements? Is this clear to you, Mr. Langely?"*

*Mr. Pennyroyal leaned on his walking stick and affected the manner of someone quite bored by these proceedings.*

*"Uh, yes, sir. It's clear."*

*"Well, then. It appears we have reached an agreement. If you will come with me I will introduce you to Mr. Jennings, the head butler, who will inform you of your immediate duties. Your position begins now, Mr. Langely. Do not think you will ever get a, how do you say it here, 'free ride' from me. Is that also clear?"*

*"Y-Yessir. It's clear, sir."*

*As they headed towards the main house, Benjamin had the distinct impression that the longer he spent in Mr. Pennyroyal's company, the more he would take to stuttering.*

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*"Psst. Hey, you're the new guy my father just hired, right?"*

*A young man, small in stature and rather effeminate, spoke softly through the night. Ben was seated on the steps outside his bunkhouse rolling a cigarette.*

*"Uh, yah, guess I am."*

*"Do you mind if I sit down?"*

*"Go right ahead - the steps aren't mine."*

*"No. They'll be mine someday though. I'm Jackson Pennyroyal. The son. And I'm not supposed to be talking to the help but man, are the people around here dull! I'm going to go crazy if I don't talk to someone around my own age. You're about 30, 31, right?"*

*"I'm 25."*

*"Hey, that's my age! What's your birthday?"*

*"May 23rd."*

*"Oh, mine is January 1st. Pretty cool, huh. Every year starts out celebrating my birth!"*

*Ben narrowed his eyes at this strange figure, not sure how to respond. The boy seemed to be trying to talk 'commonly' and sounded all the more uncommon in the process.*

*"Uh, that was a joke. That was supposed to be a joke. Well, father does keep telling me I'm not very funny. Hey, can I borrow a cigarette, man? I'm not supposed to smoke anything. Or drink. Or swear. Or do anything. My life is such a drag."*

*Ben couldn't resist responding to that particular statement.*

*"Yah, it must be a real drag living in a place like this."*

*Jackson looked startled, unused to such insolence from those who worked for his father.*

*"Well, I see your point, but you don't know my father. You've been here only three weeks. Just wait until he really gets his hooks in you. Then you'll know what I mean. He can make anybody do anything, except stay. They leave in droves. There's a worn path that leads out of this place straight back to civilization. Of course, my father would tell you that you're sitting on the only civilized ground this side of the Atlantic."*

*Jackson paused and the silence made both of them feel awkward.*

*"So, you're the son. Do you mind if I'm honest with you?"*

*"No, not at all."*

*"Why are you treating me like your best friend all of a sudden? I saw how you looked right through me the other day. You treated*

*me just like your father. That's fine. I expected that. But if that's how it's gonna be, don't expect me to be your friend."*

*"Oh, man. I'm really sorry. I have to act like that when I'm with my father. It's this Pennyroyal thing. I have to observe certain behaviors, certain traditions. It doesn't mean anything."*

*"Well, it means something to me."*

*Ben turned away from Jackson and started a new cigarette. Jackson's voice turned pleading.*

*"Listen, I really need someone to talk to. My dad's on my back about getting married and producing a grandson for him. Producing the next Pennyroyal heir. It's such antiquated shit. I mean, this isn't England. And it's 1967, for God's sake. He just doesn't get it."*

*"Don't you have someone else to talk to? I don't know, a neighbor or a friend? Maybe you're mom?"*

*"My mother? Ha, that's a really good one. If I talked about dresses and parties then maybe she'd pay attention. I think at this point she doesn't even remember my name."*

*"Then, someone else? Someone who's been here longer than me?"*

*"No. They're all assholes. I try to talk to them and all I get is 'Yessir, Mr. Pennyroyal. Will that be all, Mr. Pennyroyal, sir?' Ugh, I could just punch one of them sometimes! But that wouldn't befit a Pennyroyal, now would it?"*

*"So, you've chosen me for a friend because you think I'm not an asshole?"*

*"He hasn't had time to get his hooks in you yet, you see? And well, I have to confess I was spying on you the other day and I saw*

*you flip Mr. Jennings the bird when his back was turned. That was great, man! Oh, I'd love to do that!"*

*"Yah, it felt pretty damn good at the time. But I'm gonna have to play it smarter than that if I want to keep this job. So, don't go looking to me to be some kind of rebel or somethin'."*

*"No, no, I know. I really just want someone to talk to and you seemed cool. If it's a problem, I won't bother you again."*

*Jackson started to get up off the step and head back to his room.*

*"Hey, wait. It's okay with me, I mean, if you want to talk sometimes."*

*"Really?" Jackson's face lit up like a child's.*

*"Yah, sure."*

*"Great! I'm still going to have to act a certain way when my father is around, though. So, don't take it personally. It's just what I have to do."*

*Jackson headed back again, delicately placing his unsmoked cigarette in the step by Ben's feet.*

*"Hey, what should I call you?" Ben shouted out.*

*"What do you mean?"*

*"Well, you don't seem to like, 'Yessir, Mr. Pennyroyal, sir'."*

*"Oh. That. Just call me Jackson. When we're alone, that is."*

*"Right. Got it." Ben smiled cynically.*

*"See ya later." Jackson yelled back, as eager as a kid.*

*"Yah, see ya."*

*Ben watched Jackson walk off never having thought to ask Ben his name.*

---

*Three years had passed on the Pennyroyal Estate and Ben had watched as Jackson turned more and more into his father. Ben knew it wasn't what Jackson wanted for himself but Ben supposed he didn't know how to stop the powerful course. Of tradition. Of position. Of his father. Last month, the transformation had taken a turn as Jackson, for the first time, stood up to his father.*

*"If you think I am going to agree to an arranged marriage with a girl I have never met, much less laid eyes on, then you are in for a rude awakening!"*

*Jackson had thrown down his napkin and was now standing at his place at the dinner table, his hands clenched into fists and his legs trembling.*

*"How dare you address me in such an insolent manner! And it is you, my son, who is under the mistaken impression that you have any say in these matters."*

*Jackson's father was now standing as well, leaning heavily on his cane and ringing the bell for Jennings. Jackson's mother continued to eat her braised squab without interruption.*

*"You rang, sir?"*

*"Yes, Jennings. Jackson and I have finished and we will take our port in my office. Mrs. Pennyroyal...has not yet finished."*

*"Very good, sir."*

*Jackson and his father stood at arms on either side of the table. It was Jackson's role to lead his father out of the dining room and into the library, or some other room equipped for male dialogue. But he refused. Standing as still as stone at his place on the far side of the room. This small battle he won, and it was Jackson's father who moved first, stalking to the door as angrily as possible without appearing undignified. Jackson made the customary nod to his mother, tightening his mouth at her lack of response, and followed his father out the door.*

*When he entered the plush office, his father was already seated. His features had been reset into implacable authority and his forehead had been swabbed to erase the unforgivable evidence of nervous sweat that had gathered there.*

*"Please be seated, Jackson. We will discuss this like civilized men. I will not tolerate another such outburst."*

*Jennings rapped lightly on the carved wooden doors before entering with a drink service.*

*"Ah, Jennings. Over there, thank you. We won't need your services for the rest of the evening. Please see to Mrs. Pennyroyal and instruct her to leave us undisturbed."*

*Jackson watched his father with reluctant admiration. He was irresistibly attracted to his father's command, though he suffered under it. He was beautiful to watch really, like a snake, sliding delicately, sinuously through the dirt, unsoiled from the course and unafraid to strike.*

*"Now, let us toast, my son, to a plain, simple truth: if you do not accept this arrangement, I will cut off your trust fund and exile*

*you from Pennyroyal Estate. I will in all matters disown you as my son. My son exists in my eyes only to the extent that he obeys my wishes. This is the Pennyroyal way, and as long as you bear the Pennyroyal name, it is the rule under which you will live. This is how it was for me with my father. This is how it has always been. It is not my place to counter tradition. The choice is therefore yours. Attempt to live without money, family or friends, dependent on the use of wits you have never had to develop, or simply accept that I am acting in your own best interests and accede to this marriage."*

*Jackson watched his father slide around him in the dirt, hissing into his ear the words that made it impossible for Jackson to refuse. The venom had hit its mark. It stung in Jackson's mouth as he raised his own glass and said: "You win, father. I accede to the marriage. I surrender."*

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## Chapter 6

It would turn out to be a rare, sunny day in what had been a stormy month, as dawn rose slowly, proudly, up from the ocean blue. Penelope was watching its ascent from a perch on the west end of the hill. It was the largest view of the ocean around, according to Ben, so seemingly big that it hinted at not only Washington and California, but the Chinese mirage that children believe lay beyond the horizon. There were only three arrows on a true pacific compass: north, south and west, to the horizon.

Though Ben had warned her about strong winds blowing fast from behind, Penelope had sought out this perch for precisely its danger. Today was the last day of October and she had decided to decide. She had thought over all her thinking-over. Now, it was time to make some sort of choice.

The rock on which Penelope sat had been artificially placed. She wondered if Ben had moved it. She wondered if he had moved it for Jack. Had her husband sat here too? Had he come here to think like her, to look out over the blue and wonder at its size, its example of our own insignificance? Running her hand over the surface of the smooth rock, she felt her husband's presence so strongly. She realized that this spot reminded her of him. His long, tall bones. His wheat-colored hair and watery eyes. Maybe it was the beauty of the place. Maybe the danger. Maybe the loneliness.

Though it was an unusually warm morning, Penelope felt that ever-present October chill, the chill of a coming winter and too much summer still in the blood. She wished that she had tried harder to

win the quilt out from under Mott. But the cat and his sizable girth had been victorious, and now she shivered from the cold. Triumph of the master indeed.

Mott had been her comfort over the last four weeks -- so simple to care for, so loyal in caring back. Benjamin had been a comfort as well, but he was part Jack's, part of what she didn't understand. And Ben had been restless, disturbed. He was doing his best to look as satisfyingly loyal as the King Tabby, but he nevertheless gave the impression that, like Jack, he wanted to run. Destiny worked as steadily in Ben's life as it did in Penelope's, and somewhere, in the recesses of his cabin, in the crevices of the night, he heard his past moving toward him like a train gathering speed, the wheels squeaking against rust and time, rolling and gathering, rolling and gathering, moving toward him for a reckoning. He had had a family once too. And he had run. Suddenly it seemed he hadn't run far enough.

Though at first Penelope thought she wanted to hear all the details of Jack's past, as the days rolled on she shied away from asking Ben to tell her. The month had passed quickly, night and day melting into each other with little distinction. She slept and woke, stared and sat, and then napped and woke and stared and paced and sat and stared and slept again - days spent in the avoidance of anything real. Sometimes she took a brief walk, often she never changed out of her nightgown, and mostly she ate only the toast and tea that was so habitual she didn't need to think about it. Ben had attempted a game or two of chess with little success. She would pick up a piece, feeling its contours in her small, cold hand and get lost in

thought, rolling the pawn from finger to finger. At nightfall, Ben often came over with a warm pot of chowder, but its fragrance never quite reached her senses. He had not pressed her, but he worried at the loose hang of her clothes.

The only activity which both of them enjoyed, the one that they made a pilgrimage to each evening, was the music of his battered, old harmonica. High up in the coastal hills, seemingly the only two humans around for miles, he played song after song until they sunk into a natural silence. That was her favorite time. When the lingering notes of the songs he'd played mixed with the rustling of the trees, the whistle of the wind, and the soft percussion of the ever-present rain.

*"Ben, where did you learn to play the harmonica like that?"*

*Penelope's arms were wrapped around her knees and her head was cocked towards Ben.*

*"My mother used to say I learned to play 'while's I was still in the womb'."*

*"She sounds like quite a character. Were you close?"*

*Ben avoided Penelope's eyes and looked out instead over the green slope of the hill. Doug Firs quivered in the wind. A hawk flew overhead.*

*"When I was little, I thought the sun rose and set in my mother, my father too. They were good to me. Good people. Hardworking. Honest. My dad's the one that bought me my first harmonica. He played it himself, and I'd sit out on our own front porch, not near as nice as this one, and he'd play for me. They're real*

*good people. Still living down there in the same town, same house. I haven't seen 'em in years." Ben cleared his throat. "We just lost touch, I guess."*

*"Where's down there, Ben?"*

*Ben shifted his legs back and forth and took his time responding.*

*"Louisiana," he said at last, on an indrawn breath. "Outside Baton Rouge. Real outside. Just about 25 or 30 families in the middle of nowhere. Oh, man, did it feel like nowhere as a kid."*

*Penelope had moved down off the porch step and was now leaning against the railing.*

*"I never really knew my mother. She died when I was four and I don't remember much about her. I remember she had long, blond hair like mine. Hers went all the way down to her hips. My Pop say's she was a real beauty. But, I don't know if I can trust that. He says the same thing about me."*

*Penelope lowered her eyes and played with the ends of her shirt.*

*"I miss him. I worry about him living all alone. When I called the other day he sounded funny. Like he sounds when he's sick. You now, trying to pretend everything's all right. Maybe I should go check on him. I mean, there's nothing keeping me here, is there? At least, not right now."*

*"Penny, are you really thinking about leaving?"*

*Ben straightened his back warily.*

*"Oh, I don't know, Ben. No, not really, I guess."*

*Penelope threw up her hands and sat heavily back down on the porch. The wind hummed through the trees. Leaves shook off old raindrops.*

*"Will you play one more song for me, Ben? Something sad and sweet?"*

*Ben was suddenly reminded of a memory from long ago, when those words had been said to him by another sweet, sad woman.*

*"You got it, darlin'," he said with nostalgia in his voice, and as Penelope closed her eyes, he filled the night air with the soft, tinny sound of summertime blues.*

Ben's playing last night stirred Penelope in a way it hadn't before. The notes seemed insistent, the rhythm portentous. She left the front porch after his last song and went to bed restless, afraid that she knew what it was the song had been trying to tell her. Indeed, when she awoke, the rhythm was still there, pulsing in her blood and moving her to a decision. Now perched on the rocky edge of a precarious cliff, she felt that beat coursing under her skin, pushing from the inside out.

"So, what's the call, ocean? Should I stay or go? Should I keep hoping, or give up?"

Penelope's questions resounded over the surf, pushing through the bulging waves down into the deep. They plummeted through the void, down, down, past the last evidences of life, until they rested, as light as air, on the soft floor below.

Penelope waited far above, hugging her arms around her knees and rocking slowly back and forth. Her pale hair flowed over pale

skin, blond ends catching the wind and flying about her face. The sound of the churning waves were muted, as if an ocean dial had been turned down, and all her senses were fixed on that soft floor below. It was filled in her imagination with the spirit of prophecy and she was taut, listening with every joint, bone and cell in her body.

Suddenly, over the waves, across the surf, and straight up into her own heart flew a decision. It pierced her confusion in two. She would stay. She would stay. Of course, oh, of course! She would stay and hope and build a life in his absence. She would refuse to accept his abandonment. She would refuse! She would stay and she would be loyal. She would stay and she would fight!

Penelope was amazed she didn't realize sooner this was how she felt. She gripped the rock under her in relief. It was so clear to her now, and she was filled with purpose.

Penelope stood up from her perch and with a small nod of her head thanked the ocean. The water has strange powers, she thought. It was best if you respected them. Zipping her jacket with a crisp, confident tug and pulling her spine up straight, she headed back to the house, and as if it had never left, a ravenous hunger returned. Tonight, she would sleep away October, throwing off its shroud. Tonight, she would dream. In the morning she would wake up, open her eyes, and face the coming Winter. She thought herself vastly prepared. Ben should have told her otherwise.

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# PART II:

NOVEMBER

## Chapter 7

*Ben was the one sent to retrieve Elizabeth from the train station. Jackson must've had a hand in getting him the assignment, for the two of them had spent many long nights discussing her arrival. After a period of feeling sorry for himself and ashamed of his surrender to his father, Jackson rallied with enthusiasm. He pestered his father for any and all information about his intended bride. The responses were unsatisfactory. All Jackson knew was that her name was Elizabeth Margaret Spencer; she was twenty-nine years old, one year older than he was, which gave him considerable anxiety; she was the oldest in a line of four daughters, no sons, and her father, Reginold Spencer, was in considerable debt to the Pennyroyals. Ben and Jackson concluded that the marriage had been an expedient plan for Mr. Spencer to simultaneously get rid of his debt and an aging daughter, and for Mr. Pennyroyal to get in turn a daughter-in-law of good breeding and solid reputation, a daughter-in-law that he correctly assumed his son would have had no idea how to snare on his own.*

*The arrangement horrified Benjamin; increasingly, it excited Jackson. He began to see Elizabeth as an ally, someone of his own, someone to understand him, comfort him, protect him. Never did he seriously entertain the idea of falling in love with her. Nor did she entertain it for him. Above all, they couldn't forget that. This was a business arrangement. They would simply have to make the best of it. But, they did forget. They asked for more. And that was their first mistake.*

*As Elizabeth stepped off the train, she forced herself to remain calm. "I will be all right. I will be all right," she repeated like a mantra. "This is what must be. This is what must be." She didn't know who to expect on her arrival, so she dressed for important company. Better to arrive in needless finery than needful rags. Better to be overprepared. The show of ostentation reassured her, made her feel less like the currency she was. But in the end, her show was for naught. Instead of coming themselves, they had sent only a servant to meet her. She wished she'd worn her even better dress.*

*Ben watched Elizabeth dismount with disbelief. She was beautiful. My God, she was beautiful. She looked like nothing and no one he'd ever seen before. He was dumbstruck and he would never recover. All his energies he focused on trying to force out the words Jackson had coached him to say. As she walked towards him, he bit his tongue to get it moving.*

*"W-Welcome, Ms. Spencer. On behalf of the, the Mister's Pennyroyal may I welcome you to their, uh, to their humble part of the world. My name's Langely and I'm here to assist you in anything you require."*

*Benjamin smiled hugely at the end of his speech and congratulated himself on a superb performance. Elizabeth wondered where in God's name they'd found such a provincial creature.*

*"Thank you for your welcome, Mr. Langely. At the moment I require only the recovery of my luggage. Ah, I see the porter is bringing it now. "*

*Ben simply stared at her, mesmerized by her accent and sophisticated manner.*

*"Perhaps, Mr. Langely, you could show me to the car. I am rather tired."*

*Elizabeth waited for the strange man to respond. His sole ability seemed to lie in staring at her. After some moments she set out herself, looking for what she assumed would be the most expensive car in the lot. She only hoped the servant would follow and redirect her if she chose incorrectly.*

*Ben gathered himself together enough to bring the porter along with him as he followed her. Somehow she knew which car to go to. Did her list of talents never end?*

*Once they were on the road to Pennyroyal Estate, Ben realized how he must have appeared to Elizabeth and attempted to rectify the situation.*

*"Um, Ms. Spencer, I hope I didn't make a bad impression back there. You just took me a little by surprise. Usually, I'm a real smooth talker."*

*At this point, Elizabeth didn't find it at all odd that the servant thought uninvited conversation with his betters was appropriate behavior. Frightened enough already by her current situation, she chose to follow his lead and forget years of training in proper etiquette. He did seem rather nice, and he had lovely brown eyes.*

*"May I ask what it was about me that you found so surprising, Mr. Langely?"*

*Ben spoke without thinking.*

*"You were so beautiful."*

*And with those words, Ben unwittingly garnered Elizabeth's affection for life.*

*When Ben pulled up to Pennyroyal Estate, he and Elizabeth had spoken nonstop for forty-five minutes and Ben had lied about what the Pennyroyals were like at least five times. He managed to allay her fears somewhat, more due perhaps to the fact that she now felt like she had a friend than because of anything in particular he said. But as he turned off the engine and Jackson Sr. and son headed towards them, Ben heard Elizabeth mutter under her breath, "I will be all right. I will be all right."*

*"Ms. Spencer, welcome to Pennyroyal Manor. I am Jackson Pennyroyal I and this is my son Jackson Jr., your intended. Please come inside and there we will make more proper introductions."*

*Ben had been watching Jackson from the corner of his eye as he assisted Elizabeth out of the car. He saw Jackson's eyes go wide, just as his had done, and he knew Jackson was very pleased. More importantly, he watched Elizabeth make no such motion. She looked at her future husband and then looked quickly away to his father. Her perusal was as emotionless as one's perusal of a wall. Benjamin began to worry.*

*The wedding ceremony went off without a hitch, which was perhaps why it felt so hollow. The new Mr. and Mrs. Pennyroyal kissed like actors - Elizabeth pretending to be affected, Jackson*

*pretending not to be. Pennyroyal played the role of the proud father, exerting the couple towards the dance floor where Jackson flailed embarrassingly; persuading Elizabeth to throw the bouquet though she didn't know any one of her attendants; and posing the couple for picture after strained picture that no one would ever frame. Jackson's mother was the only one having a sincerely good time. She gossiped about the wedding guests for hours and consumed two bottles of champagne. After flirting openly with her son's best man, a distant Pennyroyal cousin, she passed out at one of the tables, and was henceforth gossiped about for months.*

*Jackson was still upset that his father hadn't allowed Benjamin to be a guest at the party. Leaving his bride to her self-pity, he snuck over to where Ben was sitting on the far lawn.*

*"Hey, Ben. I feel horrible you have to be sitting out here. My damn father again."*

*"Nah, I'm all right. What would I say to those people anyways? Your dad may have been right on this one."*

*"Well, it is pretty horrible over there. I think my mother's passed out with her face in a piece of wedding cake."*

*"Oh, man, I would've loved to see that."*

*"Yah, she was in top form tonight."*

*Ben noticed Elizabeth looking their way. So did Jackson.*

*"So, how's it feel to have her on your arm? She looks a little like a trapped animal in that dress. Well, 'till death do you part', right?"*

*Jackson's eyes opened wide and began to blink rapidly. He cleared his throat several times before answering.*

*"Now that Elizabeth and I are married, I'd appreciate it if you could respect our privacy," he said softly.*

*Ben was stunned.*

*"Why sure, Jackson. Of course. I just meant to tease you a little. You seemed uncomfortable, like you could use a good laugh."*

*"I don't think it's your place anymore to judge if I'm uncomfortable or not. And I'd also like it if you could refrain from baiting me into these situations. I don't appreciate being teased."*

*"Jackson, I...."*

*"Just leave Elizabeth and me alone. Can't anyone do that?"*

*Jackson stalked off back to the reception, leaving Ben confused and worried, leaving him to brood alone on the far end of the lawn.*

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*Over the course of the next year, Jackson and Ben grew further apart, and to everyone's surprise, Jackson and Elizabeth grew closer together. Perhaps it was they felt they had no one but each other. Perhaps it was Elizabeth's acceptance of her situation, or perhaps they truly did fall in love. Looking back on those days, Ben thought it was most likely a mixture of the three. Jackson was right that Elizabeth would become his ally. Living in close quarters with Mr. Pennyroyal, she quickly saw him for the autocrat he was. Fights began between him and Jackson as she bolstered her husband with support, and later, even she got embroiled in the nightly post-dinner arguments. By their one-year anniversary, a gauntlet had been*

thrown. Mr. Pennyroyal would have to concede them certain freedoms or they would leave. Pennyroyal countered with his standard threat of disownment, but with Elizabeth at his side, Jackson felt he could at last conquer his father, or at the very least, leave him. Jackson decided that through her, he'd come to understand he was in fact quite clever and capable of providing for himself in the real world. His father countered, and he responded in true Pennyroyal fashion:

"Go ahead, father. Disown your only son. Make your future grandson, the next Pennyroyal heir, illegitimate. I no longer need your money, nor do I need you. You almost won, you know. You almost made me as miserable a man as you. But you didn't figure on Elizabeth turning out to be my ally instead of yours, did you? A gross miscalculation, father. I'm rather disappointed in you. Do what you will with my inheritance. It means nothing to me anymore. Elizabeth and I will be leaving tomorrow at daybreak if you choose to come say good-bye."

Jackson was flushed and triumphant as he left his father's office that day. And he had indeed won. Pennyroyal surrendered as his son and daughter-in-law were starting their car to leave. He guaranteed Jackson his inheritance, and though his son still drove away, he never reneged on that promise. Jackson received every penny.

Jackson believed in the words he'd said to his father - believed in them sincerely. Unfortunately, they just weren't true. With each new penny he received, he became one penny closer to the father he thought he'd left behind. With each million, he grew farther away

*from Ben and then from Elizabeth, until all he had left was the face of his father in his mirror each morning. He hadn't won after all. Nor did he ever realize his father hadn't wanted to fight.*

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*Ben, Jackson and Elizabeth arrived on the Oregon Coast in September of 1970. Jackson knew immediately on which property he wanted to build his own Pennyroyal Estate. It was the largest. It was the highest. It looked down on everything else. Elizabeth was discouraged by the coastal weather and the small, 'provincial' towns. She had hoped they would end up in Boston, New York, or Chicago. Even California was acceptable if they had to move west, but it certainly wasn't her first choice. Quickly she learned that Jackson didn't consider such choices to be democratic. He sought Elizabeth's support. He sought her charm. He even, in his own awkward way, sought her love. But he did not seek her opinion.*

*Ben could have remained in Oklahoma had he chosen to. Relations between he and Jackson were strained, and privately he thought that Jackson wanted him to stay. But his choice to go with them was for Elizabeth, and she had been so delighted with the idea that she persuaded Jackson it was a good one. "Indeed, we do need a servant and who better than Benjamin to take care of those necessities along the trip which are beneath us? After all, he is a friend."*

*Elizabeth and Ben's friendship grew considerably over the course of the trip. Ben sought to allay her fears over their unknown*

*future and Elizabeth let him. For Ben, being with Elizabeth was like being in another world. She read to him from her books and they talked for hours about the Classics, her favorite, and about the Romantics, his favorite. She undertook to teach him "proper English," and to a degree succeeded, though he always reverted back to his drawl when he felt deeply about something, and he persisted in using endearments to address her. "Sweetheart" and "Darlin'" were two particular favorites, and could always get a rise out of Elizabeth when he wanted them to. Jackson watched their repore with envy. It became increasingly more important for him to get a hold over her, to control her, and all that he had learned from his father began to make sense.*

*Throughout the winter, the three labored to build a home on top of their remote hill. The work was slow, difficult, and they found the locals much less interested in the money they threw around than they had planned on. Much of the work they had to do themselves. It was a hard winter and a bad beginning.*

*Jack Hill was born from struggle.*

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## Chapter 8

The phone rang and Penelope ran to it, wondering why her father would call at such a late hour.

"Hello. Papa?"

The person on the other end of the line was silent.

"Papa, is that you?" Penelope asked, her heart beginning to beat rapidly. The caller remained silent.

Penelope covered the mouthpiece with one hand and covered her own mouth with the other. My God! Was it Jack? She took several breaths before asking tremulously: "J-Jack?" Still, there was no response, only the faint murmur of someone else's quick breath.

"Jack, speak, please. I need to hear you voice. Please, Jack."

Silence.

"Don't call me like this and not say anything. Jack, please!"

Still only silence. Penelope began to cry, her tears rolling off the side of the phone. And then she heard a voice, barely audible, a voice cracked like hers.

"I'm so sorry, Penelope."

That was all, and then the line went dead.

Penelope stood in shock in the middle of the kitchen. Her nightgown hung crooked off one shoulder and her hair was tangled into clumps. It took her twenty minutes before she made it back to bed.

---

Two days later, lounging in a bubble bath, Penelope decided to think about her plans for Thanksgiving. She would miss not spending it with her father, but she didn't think leaving Jack Hill was a good idea. Her situation was fragile. If she left, if she went home, who knew what might happen. On the other hand, she couldn't have her dad visit here. She wasn't ready to tell him about Jack, didn't know how to tell him. So, where did that leave her? As her head ducked under the surface of the bath and she was surrounded by silky, hot water, a solution presented itself. Why not have Thanksgiving here, for her and Ben? It would be almost like the real thing. Almost like home. Rolling the idea around in her head, Penelope felt the liquid of the bath reach inside her bones. Her blood felt induced to stop; to rest and breathe, unbidden. She was suspended. The claw feet of the tub dug its talons into the floor to hold down the room while she floated weightless.

"Yes, a holiday. That's just what I need."

One week later, Penelope woke to a long day of preparation ahead. The morning of Thanksgiving had arrived. The weather was cooperating nicely. It had decided on a light, pale fog and the requisite mild, but portentous chill of all late November mornings. Penelope thought it cast precisely the right mood for their celebration and was expecting the fog to break just enough at dusk for a glimpse at the sunset.

Over the last several weeks, Penelope had taken on the habit of rubbing her hands over her face to wake herself up. It was something she'd seen Jackson do each morning as he slung his legs

over the side of the bed. She'd also taken to hanging her coat on the rack where his once hung by the kitchen door. These imitations she did unconsciously, like a shadow lingering on the wall after its mate has passed beyond the room, and perhaps they were of comfort to her. Alone in the house as she was, with one day blurring into the next, the lonely dominance of her footsteps was all there was to mark the same, cold path each morning.

That which marked those steps, her faithful slippers, she had moved from across the room. They now slept just below the bed, ready for her whenever she needed them. Leaping across the cold floor had lost its appeal. She had also grown out of her thin, cotton nightgown and was slipping this morning into a thicker, dustier flannel. It hung heavy over every square inch of her flesh up to the neck. Even her fingers had to struggle to peak out from under its scalloped edge.

Penelope had been making her way through the room righting bed sheets and retrieving pillows from off the floor. At the vanity table, she sat down to brush her hair. She'd been finding too many loose hairs in her hairbrush and she made each stroke gingerly.

Soon finished, her heart not in the task, Penelope set out on the path to the kitchen. Her flannel nightgown brushed up against her skin unnoticed. She thought only of the big day ahead and remarked to herself that the house was awake early this morning. Usually, she was able to gulp down several cups of tea and a toast or two before it began to stir, but this morning, with Thanksgiving just hours away, the house was like her, wide-eyed and ready to work. As she walked to the kitchen, Penelope left the wood-stove unlit and forgot

to open the door for Mott. He clawed pitifully at the mesh screen, shocked that she wasn't letting him in. It was the turkey that was foremost in her mind. Its plumpness, its shine, essential marks for how her day would go. Penelope poked and prodded her centerpiece, suspicious of Ben's poultry-shopping abilities, but the bird he'd chosen was well-rounded over the breastbone, fresh to eye and to touch. Perfectly ripe. She declared it ready for the fire.

The dressing had already begun last night. Giblets were removed, the cavity was given a gentle bath, and the skin was delicately lifted from the breast, like a fleshy pocket, so that salt and garlic and olive oil could be rubbed over its pink meat. More golden oil had been rubbed over the entire bird, the fullness of this animal, its displaced neck, its fragile, bony wings, its clubbed feet and solid mass, grasped and held by Penelope's slick fingers. An intimacy between human and animal.

Having soaked through the night in such decadence, beads of olive oil glistened over every inch of flesh as Penelope took it from the fridge. As she moved, they quivered on top of the skin and she imagined that they trembled at the thought of what was to come.

With the turkey inside, the pan she held was quite heavy, and as she tried to wedge it into the oven, Penelope bumped her thigh against the counter. She hit it smack on her bruise, still sore after days of recovery. Recovery from a day was she wasn't likely to forget for quite a while.

*"Benjamin, I'm never going to learn how to ride. I don't mean any insult to your teaching ability, you've been very patient with me, I just think I'm hopeless. Really I do."*

*"Now, Penny. In the first place, no one is hopeless. I don't think. And in the second place, even if you were, I would have been able to spot such a thing hours ago and we wouldn't still be sitting here in the rain with bruises on both our behinds. You with me?"*

*Penelope shifted her weight from her left leg, where a fresh bruise was just now forming, gathering its blacks and browns and blues from under her skin. She had stood fourteen throws and would have to take another if Ben had his way, but as far as she was concerned, this learning to horseback ride on a maniac like Nettie simply was not going to happen.*

*"Benjamin, Jackson's been gone about a month now. I'm all alone up here except for you and you're often, I don't know where, doing I don't know what, so I don't need that charming smile of yours trying to get me back on top of that, that, demon from hell, that's what she is. And while we're on the subject, why was it that you thought my learning to ride all of a sudden was such a good idea? Don't you think I've got enough to deal with already?"*

*Penelope ended on a high note, the pitch of her voice having risen several octaves from where she began. Ben shifted in his seat on top of the fence that enclosed Nettie into a circle.*

*"No, honey, I don't think you've got enough to deal with. See, here's what I think. I think you've about died of boredom these last few weeks. You've been, well, chomping at the bit, I'd say, which*

*gave me the idea to teach you to ride, you see? You need, well, maybe this sounds crazy, but I think you need something to tame."*

*"Well, that's all fine and good, Ben. You can decide that what I need is to tame something and meanwhile I end up in the dirt fourteen times! And you can bet I've been counting. Every single damn one!! I guess I'm not such a good sport."*

*At that, Ben laughed outright, his amusement at Penelope's words clear for her to see.*

*"Not a good sport? Man, after that first fall I was expecting a full battle, not a puny little argument like you just gave me. You just took it and said nothing; just raised your chin, got back on Nettie, and waited for my next instructions. I don't know a better sport than you, Penny."*

*Ben paused.*

*"Goddamn that Jack! If you weren't how you are, he wouldn't stand a chance. As it is, he's not doing so hot, is he?" Ben threw a clump of dirt at the muddy ground, his back bent and his elbows resting on his knees. Penelope looked up at him from where she was standing against the rails, her body facing Nettie, but her eyes on the horizon down below them. Was she truly that spineless, that blindly obedient? Where was her personality? Where was her spirit?*

*"You know Ben, when Jackson asked me to marry him, he said: 'Would you do me the favor of marrying me?' Maybe that's all he was really asking for. Nothing much -- just a favor. And maybe that's why he could run away so easily. But it didn't sound like that at the time. Of course it didn't. You should have seen him in Portland. He looked so happy, so peaceful. Like he'd found*

*something he'd been searching for his whole life. You know, he would just stare at me sometimes, holding my face in his hands, running his fingers through my hair. Once I heard him say the strangest thing when he did that. He said, 'You look just like the picture I have. Just like the picture.' I don't have a clue what he meant. But there were so many little things like that, so many little strange things he'd say or do. I don't know. I guess they seemed...inconsequential at the time. But, when we came here, everything changed. He got distracted, or removed somehow. Removed from me. A couple days before he left, he took my face in his hands again, like he used to, but, it was like his eyes were seeing someone other than me. Who could he be thinking about holding my face like that?" Penelope broke down in tears, her hands like half-fists.*

*Ben started to edge down off the railing, anxious to comfort this girl. But Penelope stayed his movements. She made a half-turn towards him and lightly touched her hand to his knee.*

*"Ben, what would you think if you were me? Sometimes I think he left me for someone else, someone from the past that he can't let go of. I was too ashamed to tell you. I felt like a failure, and a fool. I still do."*

*Penelope took a deep breath and sighed. Her voice was hollow.*

*"How do I fight this, Ben? Should I be loyal to something that maybe was a mistake?"*

*Penelope looked away and Ben watched her cowed frame as it rocked back and forth trying to comfort itself. Nettie was stomping*

*the ground nearby, her hooves hitting the ground in what seemed like empathetic frustration.*

*"Ben, don't say anything or do anything, okay? Not right now. I feel like I'd just end up breaking down right here in the mud and the rain and though I wouldn't mind you seeing me like that, I won't have that devil animal looking down on me!" Penelope made a half-laugh.*

*"See, I'm gonna be okay if I can still make a joke, right?"*

*Penelope left Ben there, still sitting atop that fence rail, grooved into the position in which he had spent the whole day, but now, with important new thoughts running through his head.*

*"My God, Jack. All this time you've been looking for your mother? My God. Elizabeth."*

---

## Chapter 9

*"Jackson, where are you taking me?"*

*Penelope shrieked playfully as Jack led her blindfolded through the dark.*

*"Shh, trust me. There's something I want to show you."*

*Penelope turned her voice down to a whisper.*

*"How can I trust you? I barely know you!"*

*"Oh, you know me Penelope. You know everything important about me."*

*Jack's voice turned smooth and mischievous.*

*"Wait, there's a slope here. It's a little muddy. I guess I'm just going to have to carry you."*

*Jack picked her up with one smooth motion, looking tenderly down at the blindfold that covered most of her face.*

*"Now, I truly have you in my clutches. Ha, ha, ha!"*

*"That is the worst evil laugh I have ever heard!" Penelope giggled. "And what do you mean I know everything important about you? All I know is that you're name is Jackson Pennyroyal, but you hate it and just go by Jack; that you're tall, have light-brown hair, and blue eyes; that you're roughly my age, and that you're here in Portland on business. That's it. Not a whole lot if I do say so myself. Which I just did." Penelope giggled again.*

*"Are you sure that's all?"*

*Jack looked down again at the girl in his arms.*

*"Well, everything else I know would be based on what I've observed of you, I guess. Let's see...you hold doors open for me, so*

*that's means you're unusually polite. You call older women 'Ma'am', which affirms the first point. We've had six, no seven gourmet picnics in the park and not one meal in a restaurant. I'm not sure what that says about you. You must like picnics a lot. Um, what else. You don't say very much, at least not about yourself. And, as far as I can tell, you have only one change of clothing but a whole suitcase full of books. In fact, I think I feel one in your pocket right now."*

*"Hey, little lady. Watch those hands! You're trying to take advantage of me while I'm carrying you to safety through this dangerous park. And if you don't stop teasing me I'll just have to drop you right here in the middle of this mud puddle and pay you back!"*

*Penelope folded her hands in her lap with exaggerated care and stifled a fresh onslaught of giggles.*

*"Yes, my brave knight. My knight willing to forge through dangerous suburban parks at the crack of nine-thirty!"*

*"Okay, that's enough. I can tell carrying you for miles isn't going to gain me the respect I deserve. We'll just have to wait and see how you feel when we reach my surprise. And by the way, you forget something in your listing of my better and not so better qualities. You forgot the most important thing."*

*"Um, you walk with a slight limp? How'd you get that by the way?"*

*"No, that's not it. Try again. And how I got it is none of your business. A man should never reveal injuries that are due to ungrateful women that can't sit still while someone's carrying them in their arms."*

*Penelope faked a jealous tone.*

*"Are you trying to tell me you've carried other women like this?"*

*"Oh, all the time. It's what I do for fun. Good exercise too."*

*"Yah, all right buster. You're off the hook on that one. But I still don't know what this most important thing is that I'm supposed to know."*

*Penelope truly was confused about what Jack thought she knew. Jack was aware of her confusion and used it to prove a point he didn't want her ever to forget.*

*"Hmm, well, maybe it'll come to you. In fact, this should make it a little clearer."*

*Jack pulled off Penelope's blindfold and held her tight as she gazed at the spectacle before her. Right in front of where Jack and Penelope were standing, at the far end of what looked like a very expensive private residence, stood a gazebo covered in bright white lights. It was surrounded on all sides by blooming rhododendron bushes. Penelope spied a Jacuzzi inside the gazebo and a bottle of wine on its railing.*

*"Jack, where are we? Isn't this somebody's home?"*

*"For tonight, it's all ours." Jack said smoothly.*

*"But, but...." Penelope sputtered.*

*"Don't worry. It's all arranged. I went to school with the owner's son. I promise we're safe here. We won't be disturbed."*

*Penelope cocked her head to look in Jack's eyes.*

*"You promise?"*

*"I promise."*

*"Well then, I think the most appropriate thing to do is take off all our clothes and open the wine!"*

*Penelope blushed at her audaciousness, continually amazed at her behavior with Jack these last few weeks. She had never been more at ease. She had never had so much fun!*

*"Spoken like the woman I love."*

*"W-What?" Penelope stammered.*

*Jack's voice softened to a nervous whisper.*

*"That's my most important thing, Penelope. The only thing about me you need to know. I love you."*

*Jack lowered his eyes and let Penelope slide down his body. Cupping her face with his hands he leaned down and kissed her. The water misted around them in a warm cover of steam and the rhododendron's bloomed in praise. Penelope kissed him back with all her strength. This was more than she'd ever hoped for.*

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## Chapter 10

Looking out her kitchen window, Penelope could see the outline of dawn along the horizon. Where had her mind gone? Soon it would be day, Thanksgiving full upon her, and there was still so much to be done. The turkey that was now cooking slowly in the oven rose stoutly in its pan, beads of olive oil still glistening on its skin. Soon the kitchen would be filled with the smell of garlic and butter, the smell of its juices running together. There were few things Penelope liked better than to walk into a kitchen where the smells of warm cooking wafted about the room like plumes of fragrant, invisible smoke. Such comforts meant home. She relied upon them now as much as the meal itself.

Next on the list of dishes to create this morning was the stuffing. In regards to stuffing, Penelope was particular. She didn't like any fuss and wouldn't put in any fuss no matter what you said -- just the good, full-flavored basics. For years, she had listened to her father's two close neighbors swear up and down every Thanksgiving that an old tradition held oysters put into the batch would bring a year of good luck. But their inability to pin down the precise tradition that ascribed such good fortune to what was, in Penelope's opinion, a very suspicious ingredient, kept her from ever allowing that slimy mussel into her recipe. Routinely, their neighbors brought over their own stuffing for the celebration.

Grabbing a Walla Walla from its basket near the toaster, Penelope began to wield her knife with measured, expert strokes. How many times had she done this very chore? How much her

young life had seen of chopping and paring, peeling and slicing: the sober, repetitive chores of kitchen life. She had always taken comfort in being useful, in being necessary.

Ring-Rinng. Ring-Rinnng.

The phone shook in its cradle on the kitchen counter.

Ring-Rinng. Ring-Rinnng.

"Coming, I'm coming!" Penelope yelled, forgetting there was no one else to hear her. She ran around the side of the kitchen table to grab the phone, wiping her hands anxiously on her apron.

"Hello?"

"Penelope? It's your father" spoke a warm, but reserved voice.

Penelope tried to conceal her disappointment.

"Oh! Papa! It's so nice to hear your voice. I've missed you so much. How are you?"

"You know me. I'm doing fine. Just fine, dear. I just wanted to call my daughter and wish her a Happy Thanksgiving."

"Oh, Pop, Happy Thanksgiving to you too. I wish you were here sharing it with me. It's not going to be the same without you and Sam and Shirley. They're having you over at their house this year, aren't they?"

"Oh sure. That's where I am right now. Shirley wants to say Hello, so hold on."

(suddenly a loud shriek is heard through the phone)

"Penny, Penny my love, how are you? Oh, I miss you sooo much, we just can't bear the thought of Thanksgiving without you! And your poor father is going to have to eat my cooking this year! Sam's used to it, God love him, but I'm afraid your father's been

spoiled by you all these years and he's just not going to know what to do with me and my strange culinary attempts. Anyways, we're really doing okay, okay?, though we miss you! Are you sure you're okay? We can storm up there any time you like if that husband of yours isn't treating you right! He'd better be appreciating the jewel he has in you, that's what I have to say. But he did seem like a sweetheart. Anyways, I'm glad to hear you're doing fine. I'd better give you back to your father now. Happy Thanksgiving dear!"

Penelope was overcome with such a sense of happy familiarity that when her father returned to the line, her voice was laced with tears.

"Pop, I really miss all of you so much."

"Does that mean you're not happy up there? How is that boy treating you?"

"Oh, no, I'm okay, papa. I, I guess it's just that this holiday is getting me a little emotional. You know it's my favorite. I'm going to be fine, really. I don't want you to worry. Everything's fine."

"Well, I'd hoped to hear more than 'I'm fine' out of you, but I suppose new marriages take their adjustments. Your mother and I, well, we were just lucky...." He cleared his throat before continuing.

"I don't know if this is the best time to tell you, but Shirley's insisting that I stay with her and Sam for a while. Just until I get things back on track."

"Oh, Papa, you're all right aren't you? Is it work? Did something happen?"

"No, no, it's nothing to worry about. It's just going to take a little adjusting for me living in that house all alone now. It, well, it

just doesn't feel so much like home with you not in it. But I'm going to be fine, really, and work is fine. So, I'll just concentrate on work, I guess."

"Pop, are you sure? If you really need me, I can, well, I can... tell Jackson that I need to leave for a little while and I'm sure he'd understand. Maybe I'd better come down just to get things back on track a little."

Penelope had already taken off her apron and was eyeing the coat rack by the door.

"No, I really don't want you to do that. You should be with your husband now. The two of you are just beginning and I, I'm just an old man who needs to let his daughter go. What I really need is to hear that you're happy and that I don't need to worry about you."

Penelope paused to control her voice before she answered him.

"Don't you worry, papa, you know me. I'm always okay, right? You never need to worry about me."

"That's the girl I'm proud of! Now, make Jack thank you proper for the wonderful meal I know you're making him. I'll call again in a couple of weeks to make sure you're all right."

"You won't do any such thing. I'm the one whose going to call to make sure that you're all right! You tell Shirley not to worry about her cooking as long as she leaves out the oysters from the stuffing, okay?"

"All right, my bossy daughter. I love you. I'll talk to you later."

"I love you too, papa. Bye."

"Good-bye, honey." Click.

Penelope held onto the phone long after the line went dead. Slowly, she returned to herself, re-lacing the two ties of her apron around her back into a solid, serviceable bow; wiping the last, stubborn tears from her eyes, and pushing her chin up to a worthy angle. There was still a lot of work to be done and she couldn't stop now.

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## Chapter 11

The stuffing completed, Penelope moved on to the cranberry sauce. First, she washed and picked through the fresh cranberries, loving the feel of the small buds in her hand. She would boil them until their skins burst and then strain the fruit for her sauce. Again, with her cranberry sauce, Penelope was a purist. So many people liked to add all sorts of things, but her sauce was simply cranberry and sugar. So as not to overwhelm the turkey it would be poured upon. Cooking was all about balance, she thought. Too much of this or too little of that and all your effort was ruined.

*From his cabin, Ben listened to the fight going on at the main house. It had been going on for more than an hour and for the first time he was beginning to get scared for Elizabeth. The sound of his clock ticking loudly through the cabin, he waited for Elizabeth to come to him. She always came to see him after a fight with Jackson, and he always waited.*

*Elizabeth slammed the front door closed and ran wildly towards Ben's cabin. She ran inside without knocking and threw herself onto his cot, knowing he'd be rolling a cigarette in his rocking chair by the fire. Ben tried to look calm, tried to prepare himself for her tears.*

*"This time he's really done it, Benjamin. I don't know what to do anymore! Nothing I do pacifies him. Nothing!"*

*"Sweetheart, was this over a baby again?"*

*"Yes, of course it was. He's obsessed with it. As if I can do anything more than I'm already doing. And don't address me by those names, Benjamin, you know I don't like it."*

*"Yes, I know darlin'." Ben knew his teasing would settle her, bring her into their familiar discourse. "Now, tell me what happened," he said once she looked calm enough.*

*Elizabeth wiped her runny nose against her shirt sleeve and Ben immediately knew this fight must have really shaken her.*

*"Well, we were having the nicest dinner. The first nice one in a long time. Oh, Benjamin, I really thought that maybe things could be good again. Do you know the new cook Jackson hired? He's wonderful. He fixes my tea exactly the way I like it. But, all of a sudden, in the middle of the meal, Jackson yells for him to come in the dining room and then he fires him! It was just so strange, so nonsensical. I don't have any idea what Jackson could possibly have taken exception to. The cook's only been with us for a week! And even if the cook had done something unforgivable, the way Jackson treated him was equally unforgivable. It was like he was a different man from the one I'd been having such a nice dinner with just a moment before. The husband I used to know hated to raise his voice, acted unfailingly polite. Was once actually warm. Can you even remember that?"*

*Elizabeth stretched out her hands in a pose of supplication.*

*"Yes, I can remember Jackson like that. I miss it." Ben spoke softly, almost ashamed of the intimacy he'd revealed.*

*"I miss it too, Benjamin. He's changed so much. And now this idea about an heir? He's fixed on it, absolutely fixed!"*

*Elizabeth sighed and let her shoulders drop dramatically.*

*"Is that all that happened?" Ben asked.*

*"Oh no, that's just the beginning. We started fighting about the cook, you see? Then he stormed upstairs to our room and I followed him. I shouldn't have done it, I know. He's warned me to leave him alone when he gets like that, but I was so angry at him and he thought he could just walk away from me and the conversation was over. It was far from over as far as I was concerned, so I followed him. Benjamin, he, he threw me on our bed and looked at me with this glaze in his eyes. I don't know who he was at that moment. He told me in this soft voice that I was going to conceive his son and I was going to do it tonight. I yelled back at him that he was really dreaming if he thought I'd sleep with him after what he'd done, and he just looked at me. He stared at me for, I don't know, it must've been minutes, and then he sort of shook his head, gave me his hand, and pulled me up off the bed. He wouldn't look at me, but he told me to leave. To leave and run to you. So that's what I did."*

*Ben didn't know what to say this time. Jackson was far more on the edge than he'd realized, and apparently Jackson believed Elizabeth and he were having an affair. It wasn't hard to imagine how he'd come to think it, but it was still untrue.*

*"Elizabeth, I think it's best if you go back to the house and sleep in one of the guest rooms tonight. Don't you? With every thing going on with Jackson these days, I don't want him to jump to any wrong conclusions about you and I. Actually, I'm afraid he already has, so you'd better not stay here tonight."*

*"Do you really think so, Benjamin? I have to admit I'm not so eager to return to the house. To my own home."*

*Ben got up from his rocking chair and sat next to Elizabeth on the cot.*

*"I really think it's best. I don't think Jackson is going to do anything more. But, if you don't feel safe there, go ahead and stay here and I'll try to settle it with Jackson in the morning."*

*"No, you're right. I shouldn't stay. Anyway, you always have to sleep on the floor when I do. But..." Elizabeth's voice became soft and childlike. "...could you play me a song before I go?"*

*When she turned on her 100-watt charm, he was powerless to refuse.*

*"Sure honey, what do you want to hear?"*

*"Oh, something sad. Sad, but sweet. Like that song you played me the other day."*

*"One bittersweet song coming right up, my dear," Ben teased, bowing to her as he got up to grab his harmonica.*

*"Benjamin, knock it off," she laughed, "and I told you about those endearments! The way you use them I don't think you mean one pretty word," Elizabeth blushed despite her tone.*

*"Whatever you say," Ben acceded diplomatically, and then under his breath added, "my love."*

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## Chapter 12

It had not been easy making it up the hill with all the necessary ingredients for the meal. It hadn't even been easy going down. The road was still unstable after the storm they'd had the week earlier, and Ben thought it best to take Nettie in with the wagon rather than risk the truck on an ungravelled, free-banked descent. He'd almost bought it on this road ten years ago trying to take the Chevy down after a mud-slide, and he wasn't about to risk it with Penelope. He knew that Nettie had a surer foot than any machine, no matter what the fancy four-wheel drive manual said.

Penelope was charmed at the prospect of taking what seemed to her like a romantic journey, but the going was slow and dangerous, as Ben had predicted, and there was little romance in the slosh and bumps and jolts. On their snake-like crawl down the hillside, Penelope's scattered thoughts had quickly turned to deeper ruminations.

*"Benjamin," she asked, "has it always been this way up here? Like time hasn't affected the last one-hundred years? Like the past is always part of the present? It's so high and removed up here. Almost like time can't touch us. The world just passes by down below."*

*Penelope looked back at the retreating landscape.*

*"It's almost like the hill is haunted by the past. I don't understand how precisely, but I can feel the stillness. The lack of*

*movement forward. Did you ever notice that the wind just circles up here. It just circles."*

*Ben had been listening stiffly to her words, amazed at her perception and scared by it.*

*"I'm just a part of the past too, Penelope," he said tiredly, "I don't expect the wind to do anything but what it does. You're the only one that's looking for a future up here." Ben muttered those last words, breathing the word 'past' on a sigh, as he turned his eyes from the reigns in his hands back to the road up ahead.*

*"You're not looking for a future up here?" Penelope asked, confused.*

*"A future? No. Just a present."*

*And then Ben said something he hadn't planned on.*

*"Jack left because all he could see was the past. He couldn't start over."*

*Penelope threw up her hands in frustration.*

*"Then, why did he bring me here?"*

*Ben couldn't answer her and didn't try. The question hung between them as they continued slowly down the hill.*

*"Why?" wondered Penelope, "why such a clinging past? What happened up here?"*

*These unanswered questions lingered for the rest of the descent, but once in town, Penelope began to get excited about buying all the ingredients for the meal. Economics had been explained to her by Ben with a signed open checkbook and the statement that "Jack Pennyroyal has always had more money than*

he knows what to do with and you'd be doing him a favor if you'd take some of it off his hands." Apparently, Penelope had married into quite a bit more money than she realized, not that she had ever looked at the economics of her marriage seriously, in deference to the naive and more pressing needs of young love. But in the aftermath of Jack's desertion, the nature of her pressing needs changed, and it was reassuring to know that she was left with at least material comfort. Her first great girlhood dream of love had been taken away, or at least made considerably more complicated, and her second dream, one of never having to work for anyone other than herself, of being free to wander or walk or read or paint, to do whatever whenever, able to take care of her own special world far away from things that were ugly and mean, was given her in turn. But it didn't feel like a fair trade, and more and more she began to suspect that those ugly things she so carefully wished to avoid were in fact living alongside her now, infiltrating her isolated world.

The town she and Ben slid down into was no different from any number of coast towns along Pacific Highway 101. Its Native American name as curious to pronounce as all the rest, its air just as salty, its strip mall of driftwood, agate and shell-art stores just as tacky. But to Penelope, it was civilization. It had been almost four months since she left her father and their home outside Portland. She had never wanted much of anything to do with that big city, its lights, its diversity, its complicated choices. She had ventured into the city as little as possible when she was growing up, and when unable to avoid it, she quickly sought sanctuary in a library or art gallery or some other quiet, still place. She found that her spirit, her

energy, was a product of feeling entirely safe, and outside of home, few places afforded such security. In the midst of the city she retreated inward, confused at how easily everyone else seemed to be able to navigate through the countless sights and sounds and smells that punctuated every full city minute. It was just too much to take in: fierce honking horns in a wild stream of traffic; countless interesting faces that she would never know; the melange of steam, freshly baked bread, bulging underground sewers, smoke, rank body odor, Chinatown, tomato and garlic from Marino's on tenth, sawdust, micro-breweries and the coming rain -- all smeared into a potent mix that assailed her uninitiated nose. All this chaos she had avoided as much as possible, and she would have planned, if Jack had never come upon her while locking up Rutherford's Bed and Breakfast for the night, to find a small place next to her father in the suburbs where everything could just stay reassuringly the same. Her father needed her, after all. He hadn't done for himself since she was old enough to cook and clean, and even then, mother had been dead only two years. Her sweet father. Everything was safe as long as she was taking care of him. But the city that she had spurned, once so readily accessible, now seemed in retrospect an underappreciated slice of civilization, and making a trip with Ben into this make-shift town was a treasure to Penelope's starved senses. Not until her feet touched asphalt did she realize that she had been aching for it.

The list of ingredients that Penelope had stuffed into her pocket was longer than her own length of hair. It was a list that longed for a one-stop supermarket, though Penelope could have

*happily lingered the day away going from one small store to another. Ben apparently knew everyone in town and indicated that he wouldn't be at a loss for what to do while she shopped. He always seemed to have some mysterious errand or another. So, she set off on her own, humming to herself for the first time since she'd left Portland. This was safe. This was familiar.*

*Since turkey was her main concern and she had been told by Ben that the only place in town to get one without shooting it yourself was at the local Ray's Sentry, she had no choice but to focus her efforts there. Huge tissue paper turkeys were poised at critical junctures along the ceiling of the store, just ahead of cardboard pilgrims with long, bell-shaped guns. It was under one of these particularly malevolent pilgrims that Penelope ran into Mrs. Nicollette Cummings and her conception of her day, not to mention the details of her marriage, was shattered.*

*"Mrs. Pennyroyal! Mrs. Pennyroyal! It's me, Mrs. Cummings. Do you remember? Jack introduced us right after you first came. Mrs. Cummings, remember? I work for, uh, Mr. Lewis who lives on the top of your hill. Remember? But call me Nikki, or even Nik, all right? That's much better between neighbors, don't you think? And I never did like my name much anyways, so snooty, don't you think? Nicollette, pooh pooh, who wants to be a Nicollette? And well, Nicole, that's even worse! Have you ever met a nice Nicole? I don't think so. They're all so stuck up they can't see straight, believe me. And Nikki is such a likable name, a little perky sometimes, but then that's what Nik is for and I'm just sure you'll find one of the two to your liking. Don't you think? And I haven't even started on my last*

*name! If Randy Lee hadn't been so cute and such a good drummer, he was in a band, you know, the best from Seaside to Brookings, well, I wouldn't have looked him over twice with a name like Cummings. 'Here come the Cummings,' that's all I heard from my family for months! And then, you can't escape that other connotation, well, you know, one that I don't think I need to point out in the middle of Ray's Sentry, and that's not to mention how strange it is to have a name which ends in an 's' because when you make it a plural it ends up sounding like Cummingses, and if that's not the silliest thing you've ever heard I don't know what is! 'Here come the Cummings.' 'We're going to dinner at the Cummingses.' Oh! Really, names are just the weirdest things! But then, you must know what I'm taking about with a name like Penelope Pennyroyal, no offense, but what a whopper! And if you try to shorten Penelope to Penny, then you're Penny Pennyroyal which is even weirder, don't you think? Oh my, I'm just about foaming at the mouth I'm talking so much. You have got to stop me from running on like this! It's a condition of living with five males -- you end up jumping on the nearest female you see for a decent conversation! But, there I go again. You must tell me how you are in every detail."*

*Nikki ground to a halt but kept twittering away at the edges as Penelope thought to herself, "Indeed, I remember you Mrs. Cummings."*

*She said instead, "Well, I'm doing fine, Nikki. How are you?"*

*"Oh, don't get me started! What does a woman eight-months pregnant with four other boys to take care of do but moan and groan and pray for a girl? And don't you think I don't know that was a*

*clever diversion of yours, just then. I do truly want to know how you're doing up there. You are the newest and most mysterious addition to our little town, you know. Everyone's talking about you. All good things of course. You've certainly married into the right family to become a permanent piece of gossip, that's for sure."*

*Startled, Penelope said, "I'm afraid I don't know what you mean, Mrs. Cummings, ah, Nikki."*

*"Why the Pennyroyals are this town's royal family! Don't tell me you don't know what a soap opera you've joined!"*

*"Well, I'm starting to think that I don't know much of anything at all." Penelope felt the pilgrim's bell-shaped gun turning from its target down toward her own long neck. Suddenly, the bright artificial lights of the supermarket made her feel as if she was being interrogated, pressed for information she didn't possess. Though Nikki meant her questions in all kindness, she took on, for Penelope, the aspect of a huge, red-haired Gorgon, writhing in frantic female energy, with a stare that could freeze you in your tracks.*

*"If there's one thing I don't understand, it is why Jack keeps everything so secretive. I mean, this is the age of talk TV and it's not like we haven't all seen somebody's cousin or sister-in-law or boyfriend taking about their cross-dressing fantasies or whatnot. I think it's silly, Jack's precious secrecy, really I do. And I, well, I think I should tell you. Yes, you definitely should know."*

*Nikki's voice took on an even more conspiratorial cast.*

*"Well, you know I take care of the old man that lives at the very top of your hill in the big stone mansion, right? But what you don't know, what Jack didn't want anyone to tell you, and this is*

*between you and me, okay?, but that old man isn't really named Mr. Lewis, he's actually Jack's father, Jackson Pennyroyal II, the bastard. That's right, Penelope. Jack's very own father. Now don't look so frightened, honey, it will all make sense soon enough. You should ask Ben, he knows everything, and I mean everything. Yep, so that's who I work for, like I said, the bastard, and that's who lives at the top of your hill. That's why everyone calls it Jack Hill. It's not just for your husband. And well, they also call it that because when you say it fast it comes out like 'Jackal' and everyone pretty much thinks that's just about the perfect name for the place."*

*Penelope didn't hold a candle to this kind of raw, confessional potency that Nikki took for granted to be an asset all women possessed, and Penelope trembled visibly under the strain of trying to comprehend what was being said.*

*"Oh, honey, I can see I've upset you. Dammit, Nik, you've put your foot in it again. Well, you just take yourself right up to Ben and make him straighten it all out for you. Or better yet, make Jack do it, the silent bastard. Oh, excuse me, dear. Where is that little runaway anyways? He should at least be here to help you carry home the turkey. Ah, men. They're just boys in bigger pants, I tell you. Well, I'll leave you, dear, before I do any more damage. And feel free to visit anytime if you want to talk, okay? I'm just on the other side of the hill from you, about a half-mile down from the Big House. Okay, I'm going now. Oh my, you're pale. You gonna be okay, honey?"*

*Penelope managed to stutter out a series of "uh huhs" and head nods, hoping simultaneously to be both left alone and wrapped within Nikki's gargantuan arms.*

*"Okay, you're all right. I'm going then. Do call, if those beasts even have a phone for you to use. Well, Happy Thanksgiving, dear. You're welcome at our table if yours doesn't quite come together. See ya later, honey." And then, she was gone, and with her not only 99% of the energy in the store but the only protection Penelope had from the predatory instincts of the cardboard pilgrim above her head. Ray's Sentry was not a good place for a nervous breakdown.*

*Ben had been all too happy to do Penelope's shopping for her when he found out what she had found out, and as he deposited her in the wagon to wait for him while he tied things up, Penelope was struck by two distinct thoughts. "Why did Jackson tell me his father was dead?" and "Why did Ben look so guilty?"*

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## Chapter 13

*Jack had had enough of his father. He pushed through the trees and underbrush with intensity, catching a limb across his soft cheek. What did his father expect? That he'd find out the truth about his mother and then go right on living in his father's house like everything was all right? Living the lie he'd been taught his whole life? Damn him! Damn him and his pitiful wheelchair and his pitiful little notes! He knew everything his father was going to demand of him before he even took out that stupid note pad. Why did his dad even try? These days he just left the room as soon as he saw his father trying to write something down. Let him try to catch up in that wheelchair. Ha! He was just a dried-up old man.*

*Jack told himself he didn't care anymore. He didn't need his father. He didn't need Ben. He didn't need anyone!*

*Rain was starting to fall through the trees and night had fallen some time ago. Jack surged through the trees uncaring.*

*"Damn Ben too! Why didn't he say something before? Why did he keep letting me believe all those lies?"*

*The rain was coming down in thick streams, too thick for Jack to continue any farther. It was late May and he wasn't dressed for a storm. His arms and legs shivered with goosebumps as he looked for cover. Under a low overhang of trees he curled into a ball, wrapping his arms around his long legs and resting his head on his knees. His shelter was surprisingly effective, keeping most of the rain off his skin and clothing. He'd used such shelters before. As a child he'd run through the forest for hours. Looking for mushrooms. Looking*

*for snails. The forest made sense, somehow. It felt safe. He was more at home there than anywhere else.*

*Jack curled tighter into a ball and tried to hold back the tears that were threatening to fall from his eyes.*

*"Damn them all! I don't need them. I can go live on my own. I can go look for her. What if she's close by, waiting for me? I have to go. I have to try. I'm the one that sent her away. I'll be the one to find her!"*

*Jack waited out the night under his shelter of trees. He had resolved to leave and he would, gathering his belongings and heading out that very next day. Unable to resist years of training, he said 'Good-bye' to his father, but from that point on, he planned never to speak to him again. He was sixteen.*

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The turkey was coming along nicely, a voluminous batch of stuffing was cooking nearby, and the cranberry sauce was cooling on the counter. Penelope took out the pumpkin pies from the fridge that she had baked the day before. She was proud that she had taken the extra effort to use real pumpkin instead of a prepared mix from a can. First, she had washed and then cut in half crosswise the slightly misshapen pumpkin that Ben had picked out. She had removed its seeds and strings carefully, watching to not dig too deeply into the soft, orange flesh. Then, she placed her hollowed pumpkin halves into a pan, shell side up, and baked them for an hour. Once tender and beginning to fall apart, the pumpkin was

removed, and Penelope set to scraping the pulp from its shells. After being strained, this pulp was then mixed with undiluted evaporated milk, brown sugar, white sugar, salt, cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, cloves, and slightly beaten eggs until it was well-blended. Lastly, the pumpkin mixture was poured into two pie-shells that she had also hand prepared that day, and baked. They had come out moist and just slightly browned with a slight crack over the top. Today, she would finish the pies off with freshly whipped cream that contained Penelope's secret ingredient: 2 tablespoons of the best bourbon. Just a little touch of hidden magic to make it all complete.

*Three years had passed since their arrival on Jack Hill and Elizabeth was finally pregnant. The night she had conceived was easy to pinpoint. There weren't many nights to choose from. Jackson had quite a bit to drink and was unusually tender with her over dinner. He had asked her how her day was. He had asked her about the novel she was reading. He had appeared sincerely interested. She quickly fell prey to his charms. Later, she wondered if Jackson had planned for that night to end as it did. But, no.... He had been as charmed by her as she had been by him that night. For a few short hours, something opened up in him, and when he moved so that they could hold hands across the table, she glimpsed in him the boy he still was. Sometime early the next morning, he slipped out of bed and left her alone. Neither of them even mentioned what had happened.*

*Presently, Elizabeth was waddling down from the main house toward Ben, who stood leaning on a shovel in the sunlight. She was*

*excited about something. He could see that. She looked like a ripe, pink fruit, quivering on the branch, just about ready to fall.*

*"Jackson has left for two days!" she exclaimed as she reached his side. Her cheeks were flushed and she was panting from the heat. Her right hand lay as it always did, protective over the girth of her stomach.*

*"Elizabeth, are you sure? He hasn't let you out of his sight for more than a minute since he found out you were carrying."*

*Ben wiped a strand of hair from Elizabeth's eye.*

*"I know, it's quite odd, isn't it. Not like him at all. All I know is that he received a telephone call yesterday and he told me he had to leave on unavoidable business. He was quite upset about it. I'm sure you can imagine."*

*Elizabeth brushed a blade of grass from Ben's shirt.*

*"He told you to stay in the house, didn't he?" Ben's voice was wry and biting.*

*"Of course he did. When I arose this morning I found a list of instructions taped to my bathroom mirror. He must truly think I'm an idiot. He wrote things like: 'Don't place radio near bathwater,' and 'Remember to chew your food slowly.' Sometimes I think he's gone quite mad. This child is everything to him. More than everything. God forgive me if I have a girl."*

*Ben looked at the blooming woman in front of him. Her hair curled prettily around her face. Her skin was suffused with color. Despite her tremendous girth, or perhaps because of it, she had never appeared more fragile to him. Why had he never seen Letty like this? All he remembered thinking was that his wife looked*

*stuffed. And unpredictable. Why had he thought less upon the birth of his own four children than upon the coming birth of this one, Elizabeth's and Jackson's, their baby, not his.*

*"Well sugar, we can stand here talking in the hot sun or I can take you on a nice, cool walk through the trees. How's that sound?"*

*Elizabeth clutched Ben's arm.*

*"Oh, that sounds marvelous, Benjamin. Perhaps you can help me think of a name other than Jackson Jr. I really don't think I should saddle this poor innocent with a name like that."*

*"No, I suppose not, " Ben agreed, both of them knowing Jackson would never allow his son any other name.*

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*The tinny, brass bell rang in Elizabeth's ears. It was two in the morning and Jack Jr. needed a feeding. Elizabeth's breasts ached painfully as she made her way up to the main house. Jack had made her wait too long this time. She couldn't take this much longer. But what could she do?*

*Her feet dragged tiredly across the ground. How many times had she walked this path since the baby was born? A hundred? A thousand? She walked it in the blackness of the night. She walked it in her sleep. How could Ben have known that the little house Jackson had told him to build was for her? They thought it was a playhouse for Jack Jr. How could they have known Jackson would go this far? He could go even farther. She knew that now. Jack had the power to*

*make the courts believe anything about her. He had the power to take Jack Jr. away.*

*Elizabeth stumbled, an unfamiliar rock in her path, and she clasped her arms tight around her belly as she forged ahead through the darkness. The bell clanged again, insistent. As if she would refuse to come. How dare he think that of her! She would never abandon her son. Never!*

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## Chapter 14

*Once Ben had finished the Thanksgiving shopping and Penelope had gathered herself into some semblance of decorum, they took the road back up the hill in silence. Penelope knew that Ben knew she now needed the full truth. Too much had been half-revealed, too much had been hinted at. Penelope also knew, however, that she couldn't railroad Ben into a confession. He would tell her, but he would do it when he thought the time was right and not one second before. There was a conscious measurement to Ben's every move that defied her impatience. Now doubly, she would have to wait for a man's decision, but at least Ben's reminder would be right in front of him, daring him to have the courage to set things straight.*

*That night, Penelope was struggling to find the escape the sleep could bring her. Her room sweltered, though cold November winds battered tree limbs just outside; her sheets tangled, though she had gotten up to realign them three times. Penelope was not one to fight such a mood. She would wait in surrender until something, be it sleep or exhaustion, finally overtook her. But this night, Penelope was not interested in surrender. If she had been more familiar with the emotion, she would have realized that she was angry. Being therefore too restless to sleep, she threw the covers aside one last time, grabbed her robe, threw on her slippers, and stalked heatedly out her bedroom door.*

*Mott was curled up by the wood stove in a position of contentment. Penelope found herself increasingly envying him. Not*

*knowing what to do with herself at such a time in the night, she stroked Mott's massive body back and forth, back and forth, deeply, fiercely, as if her desperate attempts at affection could somehow bring her the affection she needed in turn. But Mott stayed half-asleep, content to linger in his own hedonistic world.*

*The darkness of the room suddenly felt like it was closing in on her, and she could feel the weight of the air pressing on her shoulders. She had to get out, had to get away, had to, had to, had to run, had to be free, had to break out of her skin into the cool air of the night. She stumbled through the door before she could tell herself she was being crazy, and ran, just ran, as far and as wildly as her legs would take her. She could feel the wind all around her. Her hair blew into her face and her robe billowed out behind her like a cape. She tripped over rocks and twigs, fell twice to her knees, and ran often into the branches of the evergreens that surrounded her. She knew she hurt, she knew she was a mess, and she reveled in it, pushed herself into it, as if to beat out whatever was weighing her down, just to fight something, anything, as long as she was fighting.*

*Having finally exhausted herself, Penelope stopped and looked around her, realizing that she had no idea where she was. Certainly, she was still on the hill, but whether North, South, East or West, she had no clue. She had run up and down and in maddened, broken circles. She could be right in front of the house and not know it, the night was so dark and her mind still far from rational. It was the barking of a dog that led her towards a recognizable position.*

*She had heard the barking before and assumed the dog to belong to the Cummings, but the sight she came upon some minutes*

later was not what she was expecting. Looming malevolently in front of her, a slice of moonlight revealing just enough to impart its dark massiveness, was the Big House: once the residence of the strangely quiet Mr. Lewis; now Jackson's father's even more mysterious home. In the middle of the night, with a late November fog moving through the moonlight and an anxious, protective canine pacing back and forth on a rattling chain, Penelope almost laughed at how gothic, how unreal it all seemed. All she needed was Bela Lugosi to step out from around the corner and then everything would make sense. The thought came to her that in a very short time her life had become very strange.

On the heels of this thought came the realization that she was indeed standing here, in front of the house that she had been severely warned away from, on top of a dark cliff in the middle of the night, and with an enraged dog somewhere close by. The coldness of the air and the speed of the wind began to assert themselves as well, and Penelope decided to start back home, shaking her head as if to clear from it the madness of the night. Following as straight and as southerly a path as possible, she limped down the hill, her arms wrapped tightly around her and her thoughts fixed on one disturbing image: a cavernous face and a hint of candle she'd glimpsed in the window.

The sound of the barking dog followed her all the way home. Once inside, she collapsed on her bed, overcome with an immense, sudden tiredness, only to dream of that cavernous face all night long. She woke up with it still imprinted in her sight.

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## Chapter 15

*"I spy a little boy," Elizabeth whispered to her son from behind a tree.*

*"Mama!" Jack Jr. ran as fast as his little legs could take him.*

*"Where's Papa? Is he with you?" Elizabeth looked around anxiously.*

*"Papa in house." Jack spouted out through the gap in his front teeth.*

*"Papa's inside, is he? Well, that means you and I get to play a little together. Okay?" Elizabeth sat on the ground and pulled her son into her lap.*

*"Okay, mama." Jack Jr. sat quietly in his mother's lap. Quiet and still.*

*"I spy a big, tall tree," Elizabeth said, continuing the game. She eyed her son ravenously as he searched for his own 'I Spy' object. Was that a new freckle? When had he lost that tooth? She brushed her fingers through his hair and tried not to appear desperate for his touch.*

*"I spy a cataprer." Jack said with some difficulty.*

*"A caterpillar?" Elizabeth instructed.*

*"Uh-huh. A green one." Jack's voice was high and soft.*

*"I spy a present." Elizabeth said with great drama.*

*"A present?"*

*"A present for a little boy. Do you know any little boys it might belong to?"*

*Jack thought about the question hard.*

*"I don't know any little boys, mama."*

*Elizabeth's heart sank. How could she have asked him that?*

*"Well, I know a wonderful little boy named Jack Jr. Do you know him?"*

*"Yesss!" Jack laughed, enthralled by his mother's teasing.*

*"Well then, since you're the only little boy around, I guess this must be for you."*

*Elizabeth pulled a small wrapped box from behind her and watched as her son opened it slowly, trying not to rip the paper as he had been instructed.*

*"It's a rock!" Jack exclaimed with delight.*

*"It's an agate. I found it on the beach yesterday."*

*"It's pretty, mama." Jack threw his arms around his mother and held the agate carefully in his palm.*

*"Now Jackson, this is a magic rock. All agates have magic. Whenever you're sad, you just hold it in your hand and wish very hard to be happy and it will grant you your wish. Here, let's try it. Give me your hand so we can hold it together. Are you ready?"*

*"Uh-huh." Jack's eyes were opened wide.*

*"Oh, magic agate, we wish to be very happy! Now close your eyes, Jackson, and wish it really hard." Jack closed his eyes just as she said. Elizabeth could see his eyebrows scrunched together.*

*"Jackson, open your eyes. Are you feeling happy?"*

*"I'm happy mama, I'm happy!" Elizabeth laughed at her son's enthusiasm.*

*"Well, there you go. The agate must have worked, because I'm feeling pretty happy right now too. Now, magic rocks like to be kept*

*in a safe place. A place where only you can find them. Where do you want to keep your magic rock? Maybe under your bed in or your playroom?"*

*Jack delicately placed the agate on a bed of moss. It lay propped up against the base of the tree that hid them.*

*"You want this to be your special place?"*

*Jack nodded his head gravely.*

*"Well then, I consecrate this spot Jackson Jr's special magic spot, and from now on, whenever you're feeling sad, you just come here, okay?"*

*"Okay mama."*

*Elizabeth brought her son into her arms and held him flush against her.*

*"Mama?"*

*"Yes, honey?"*

*"I spy daddy."*

*Elizabeth tightened her arms unconsciously.*

*"Jack, do you remember our magic song?"*

*"Uh-huh."*

*"Let's sing it really quick and then I have to go. Okay? Give me your hands. Here we go."*

*'1, 2, 3, I love you. Abracadabra, you love me too!'*

*Elizabeth gave her son a last quick hug and a kiss.*

*"Bye-bye sweetheart. I do love you very much. Now, run to your father and don't tell him you saw me."*

*"Bye-bye mama." Jackson ran away and Elizabeth felt tears gathering in her eyes and throat As she stood up and brushed off*

*the dirt from the back of her clothes, she watched enviously as her husband picked up Jack Jr. and swung him around in a circle. She looked down at the agate she'd given her son, sitting in its bed of moss, its special place. It looked so lonely. She wondered if her son would forget about it. She walked home with her head bowed.*

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*Elizabeth watched her son as he lay asleep in his bed. She had to sneak through the house to come see him tonight, placing each step with the fear that it would awaken his father, her husband. He looked so fragile, so innocent in his bed, and she felt like a stab in the breast her wish for him of a better life. Her son's hair was growing longer, she noticed. His skin had taken too much sun and his nose was slightly pink. Did Jackson notice these things? Did he know to watch for sunburn and when to cut his son's hair? She would have known. A mother always knows, she told herself.*

*A sound in the hall told her that she must leave. She had stayed too long this time. Stealing one last look at her son, Elizabeth whispered, "Goodnight sweetheart," and slipped back through the house into the night.*

*After Elizabeth was gone, Jackson opened the door to his son's room and stepped inside.*

*"Son, are you awake?" he whispered.*

*"Yes, father." Jack answered back sleepily.*

*"Did you speak to your mother this time?"*

*"No, I didn't father. I pretended I was asleep."*

*"That's my son. Good boy. There will be a big present for you in the morning."*

*Jackson leaned down and ruffled his son's hair.*

*"You understand why it has to be this way, don't you?"*

*"Yes, father," Jackson said quietly.*

*"Goodnight, son."*

*"Goodnight, father."*

*After his father shut the door behind him, Jack began to feel sad. He didn't know why. He'd been a good boy. He'd done what he'd been told. Why were there tears in his eyes?*

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*She was cornered. Her husband had done as he threatened. He held divorce papers in his hand. Her son stood next to his father, glaring at her. How could this have happened? How could he have turned her own son against her?*

*"B-But how can you say these things to me? I am his mother!" Elizabeth reached for her son, tears spilling down her face.*

*"You're not my mother! You don't care about me. You never come to see me. I want you to go away like father said!" Jack broke free from his mother's grasp and ran inside the house.*

*"Jack, honey, it's not true. I love you very much! Don't you remember? I love you!" Elizabeth's knees buckled and she fell pleading at her husband's feet.*

*"Please, Jackson. Please don't take him away from me any more than you already have. I'm his mother, he needs me."*

*Jackson kept his eyes straight ahead and spoke down to her.*

*"Please get up off the ground, Elizabeth. You are making a fool of yourself, as always. You and I both know that you are an unfit mother. You prefer to spend time with Benjamin, our servant, I might remind you, than with your own son. I have gone out of my way to overlook your...relationship with him, but it has had an undue influence on Jack Jr., and I can no longer allow you to confuse and hurt my son. I have tried from the start not to allow you or my son to form a deep attachment because I knew this would happen. I should have divorced you years ago, but I thought perhaps you deserved at least a place to stay. Frankly, I worried about you. But you have gone behind my back and wormed your way into my son's heart nonetheless. As if I am not enough for him. Didn't you realize you would only hurt him? For that I cannot forgive you."*

*"Do you really believe what you are saying, Jackson?" Elizabeth was frozen in disbelief.*

*"When you begin to think more clearly, you will realize that I am right in this. I suggest you leave before you damage my son any more than you already have. And I suggest you ask yourself this question: why didn't you argue when I proposed that you move out of the house? You have created this situation as much as I."*

*Jackson spoke softly, in a voice controlled and even. His words had always been his weapon, and his point struck home deeply when Elizabeth realized what he said. Why hadn't she fought? What was wrong with her? She had allowed the worst to happen. Jackson controlled their son. Maybe she was an unfit mother. Oh God, maybe it was true!*

*That night Elizabeth left Jack Hill. No one there, including her son, ever heard from her again.*

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## Chapter 16

Penelope moved with anticipation, her every nerve awake to the fact that she was more than halfway finished with the preparations and soon Thanksgiving would be here. Soon would be a wonderful meal, good company, and a chance to have everything right again. A chance to feel like she was home. The sun was breaking through the clouds and she felt like the weather outside was pulling for her, giving her all the energy it had so she could have a beautiful day on the right day in this cold, grey season. She needed a friend so badly she saw one even in the sun.

A bright yellow bowl full of potatoes were next in line for the attack and she lit into them with renewed gusto. She washed each one well, turning it over in her hands several times until every sprout and blemish was removed. The cooked potatoes would be mashed with melted butter, chopped parsley, hot cream and salt, until they were fluffy and smooth. A few chives were usually thrown in at the end for good measure.

Thank Goodness Ben hadn't arrived yet. She still had the turkey to take out, the peas and gravy to cook, the table to set and her own body to dress. Penelope thought to herself, "if Thanksgiving weren't such a joy, it would just be a heck of a lot of trouble."

*The morning after her mad night in the wind, Penelope was determined that Ben would decide today was the day to explain everything, even if she had to decide for him. He had waited long enough, and by God, so had she. Ben had perhaps sensed the finality*

*in the air, and soon after she'd dressed for the day, he was at the door.*

*"Penelope? It's me. I'll be in the kitchen."*

*Penelope came out some moments later to find him staring through the kitchen window, his back to her and his hands thrust so tightly into his pockets that his spine stuck out beneath his coat.*

*"Hello, Benjamin" she said, waiting for him to make the next move. After all, they hadn't spoken since she told him what she'd learned from Nikki in Ray's Sentry.*

*"Good morning, Penelope" Ben said formally, clearing his throat and smiling painfully. "I figure it's time we lay all our cards on the table."*

*Penelope blinked twice, willing herself not to back down one bit.*

*"My cards have been laid down from the beginning, Ben. They've just been sitting there, where anyone can see them. Now, you and Jackson can't exactly say the same thing, can you?"*

*"I should start over, Penelope, because I sure as hell don't want it to sound like we've been playing some sort of game."*

*"Well, that's good to hear because to tell you the truth, I was beginning to wonder."*

*By this time, Penelope was the one with two hands thrust deeply into pants pockets and Ben was the one approaching.*

*"Truthfully, Penelope, you're not a pawn in some game. I don't think any of this is a game. Why don't you make some tea, I'll go start a fire and then we can sit down and try to straighten things out. All right?" Ben's hands were imploring, caught in mid-air on either*

*side of her cheeks, not quite touching her but resting on the glow of her skin. Penelope was suspicious, but she gave into the sincerity in his eyes. Even if what he told her wasn't true or the whole truth, at least he was finally willing to talk.*

*The wood popped as it adjusted to the flames and Penelope and Ben sat nervously by the stove with two cups of English Breakfast tea. Penelope waited for Ben to make the first move. Ben sought for a way to begin.*

*"You know Penelope, you didn't just marry one man. You married his history too, and well, Jack's history is more complicated than most."*

*Ben looked over at Penelope sitting stiffly in her chair, tea forgotten, and her eyes fixed on him. Something wasn't right. This wasn't the way he wanted to tell her.*

*"Penny, why don't you grab your coat and we take a walk. There's a place I want to show you."*

*Penelope nodded dumbly. Her tea cup rattled in its saucer as she got up to grab her coat. Ben watched her cross over to put the cup down on the kitchen table and sighed inwardly. He wondered how she would react to everything that he was going to tell her. It wasn't all neat and simple, the way she liked things to be. But, there was no longer any other acceptable choice. She had to know. And perhaps, he had a greater need to tell her than he'd realized.*

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The turkey was finally ready to be taken out. Its pungent aroma wafted out through the kitchen into the rest of the house, and Mott awoke from his perch near the fire to come explore. As her centerpiece cooled on top of the stove, Penelope simultaneously cooked the green peas and made the gravy. The hour was finally at hand, and her mouth began to water at the smells and sights of what was before her. Soon it would all come together. Soon everything would at last be right.

*During his long recitation, Ben and Penelope had walked west through the forest to an area of the hill that Penelope had never explored. A light wind blew through the trees and one lone hawk flew overhead. The birds were silent. The rain held itself back. After some time, they came upon a small cabin that Ben explained was what he wanted to show her, and as they stepped inside the old, rotting hut, Penelope was assailed with the feeling that important things had happened here.*

*"This was Jackson's hunting lodge. He came here often, especially when he had something troubling him. What's funny is that he never killed one single thing he hunted. He couldn't even stand to kill houseflies. It was really the oddest thing. He would try to psych himself up to do it, try to get really angry, and then he'd turn away at the last second. After a few years, he stopped trying to hunt and just came here to think. But what's most important about this cabin isn't about Jackson. This is where Elizabeth gave birth to Jack."*

*Penelope was stunned.*

*"Here? She gave birth in here? Did it look like this then?"*

*"Worse. I cleaned it out about a month ago. Jackson never cleaned it. Come to think of it, I don't think he knew how to clean."*

*Ben smiled, contemplating what Jackson would've looked like had he tried.*

*"This isn't where she planned to give birth, is it?"*

*"Oh, no. It's so strange how it happened, really. We were taking one of our walks, deep in the woods, talking about names for Jack Jr., I think, when she turned to me real quiet and said:*

*"Benjamin, take me to Jackson's hunting cabin. I'm going to have a baby." She used to always call me by my full name, just like you do sometimes. Anyways, I laughed at her because I thought she was kidding, and she just looked at me with this strange little smile and said: "Benjamin, you do have a way of laughing at the oddest things." I picked her up right then and there, which wasn't easy, and practically ran to get here in time. That was silly of course, because it ended up taking hours, but I wasn't thinking straight. Jackson was away on some kind of business trip. That's what was so strange about it. I think it was the only time he spent away from the hill while she was pregnant. You see, he was so afraid something would happen to Jack while he was gone. The only reason Elizabeth and I could take such a long walk was because he was gone."*

*Ben paused to run his hand along a wooden table in the middle of the room.*

*"I think God chose that time for her to give birth so that she could have a few hours alone with her son before he would be taken*

*away from her. She told me later that they were the most precious hours of her entire life."*

*Ben had tears in his voice and Penelope waited for him to gather his composure. The one-room cabin was dark and oppressive.*

*"Ben, how on earth did the two of you do it? I'm afraid to even sit down in here."*

*"Thinking back, I have no idea. So many things could have gone wrong, but they didn't. Someone was looking out for us, I guess. After a while, her body just figured out what to do and then there was this dirty, writhing little thing in my hands. He was so beautiful, you know? And quiet. We worried that he wasn't crying, but he just sort of lolled his head around and stared at us. And you should've seen Elizabeth. She was...well, that night I got to see who she could have been."*

*Ben had sat down on the floor of the cabin. His finger traced lines in the dust. Penelope moved to sit next to him.*

*"How did you get her back to the house?"*

*"Well, that was the problem. We ended up spending the night there because she was so tired and I was afraid to move her. I stayed up all night watching her and the baby, letting myself forget for one night what my life really was. When it was light again, well, we returned to who we really were."*

*Ben's mouth slowly stopped moving, his words fading into silence. His gaze was fixed on the floor, his finger tracing the same circle over and over. Penelope wondered what he was thinking. Was he seeing Elizabeth and Jack and that night long ago, or was he seeing where he was now, twenty-three years later.*

*"Ben, why don't we walk back now. You can tell me the rest tomorrow."*

*Ben turned quickly from the window.*

*"No, you have to hear it all now. I need to tell it all to you now. And there's another place I have to show you. We need to keep going, Penelope, can you take it?"*

*"You're daring me to take it, aren't you?"*

*"Yes I am."*

*"I can take it."*

*"I know you can, Penelope. I know you can."*

---

Penelope surveyed the bounty of food around her: a moist, juicy turkey poised to steal the show; the bowl next to it overflowing with stuffing; a silver tureen full of cranberry sauce the color of deep, welcoming lips; creamy, chive-laced potatoes still keeping warm on the stove; a porcelain bowl full of bright green baby peas; two pumpkin pies sitting ready in the fridge; and, at the farthest edge of the counter, aching to spill over the side of its container, a boat full of the smoothest, richest, sable-brown gravy. Her eyes had already begun to feast while her stomach girded itself for this annual onslaught of sensation. Ben would be here any moment, so Penelope hurriedly set the table with the nicest, unchipped plates they had, a new tablecloth they had picked up in town, and two silver candlesticks she'd found in the back of the pantry. The candles lit,

Penelope spun excitedly around and took one last eyeful before dashing into the bedroom to quickly throw on a dress.

*Ben looked tired as he and Penelope walked back through the forest of evergreens, this time forking to the right. She was worried about him. His voice had become so hollow as he continued with the story, and his shoulders were stooped over like a man pulling a great load.*

*A light rain had begun to fall while they were inside the cabin and it glistened on their hair and clothing as they walked. Everything was so quiet, so still, the hawk no longer flying overhead, no seagulls circling below. Just the far-away echoes of the ocean tide rushing forward and falling back, rushing forward and falling back, in that ceaseless rhythm that never reaches rests, never stops, never reaches its end.*

*Ben stopped walking and turned to face Penelope. There were tears in his eyes, old tears, the residue of so many lonely nights.*

*"Do you see that embankment down there, Penelope? The one that's cut at a sharp angle into the earth and then just falls for what seems like miles?"*

*Penelope narrowed her eyes, bewildered by this change in topic and hearing a new, almost menacing tone in Ben's voice.*

*"Yes, I see it Ben."*

*"That's the embankment that Jackson fell off one week after Elizabeth left. He was walking with one of his dogs when he slid in the muddy ground and fell over the side. He bit half his tongue off*

*as he rolled down the slope and when he came to hours later, he was crippled. He hasn't been able to speak a word since the accident."*

*Penelope hands were clutching her cheeks.*

*"Oh, my God," she said. "I had no idea. Jack told me his father was dead."*

*Ben laughed painfully.*

*"Yah, I guess you could say that."*

*Penelope looked out over the embankment. Whatever Jackson had done, he hadn't deserved this. Ben's gaze was to the horizon.*

*"You know, it's just so goddamn ironic. One week earlier, and Elizabeth would have been the one to raise Jack. Jackson tried to command his son from his wheelchair, but without his voice, his weapon, he was powerless."*

*Ben turned to Penelope, twisting his mouth into a cruel smile.*

*"Life sure is funny, 'aint it?"*

*Ben and Penelope walked back to the house in silence. It was just starting to get dark and the moon was beginning to come out from under its shadow. Neither could look the other in the eye. There was too much to see there, too much revealed. After a while, Ben found his voice again.*

*"That's all I'm going to say now, except for this. When Jack was thirteen, he started leaving Jack Hill for long periods of time. Sometimes I wouldn't see him for a year or more. I never knew what he was doing precisely. He wouldn't tell me. But from some things you've said, I finally figured it out. Penelope, Jack's been looking for his mother all these years."*

*Ben paused, unsure whether or not to reveal the last bit of information.*

*"Penny, you look just like Elizabeth."*

*Ben's voice trailed off awkwardly. Penelope stood with her hands folded neatly over her stomach. Her fingers were clenched together so firmly that her knuckles were a bony white and her fingertips a bloody red.*

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Penelope flew through her bedroom, trying to take her nightgown off and put her dress on at the same time. It took her less than a minute to button the few buttons there were on her simple dress, and only slightly longer to twist her hair up into a bun, smear a layer of lipstick across her lips and put two small pearl earrings into her ears. There, good enough, she thought. The food's getting cold and Ben's going to walk through the door any minute. What a whirlwind this was, but how exciting! Her blood hadn't moved this fast in months! Oh, it was going to be perfect, just perfect!

Dressed and bursting with anticipation, Penelope hurried back into the kitchen at a half-skip. She craned her neck to see out the kitchen window. No sign of Ben just yet. Where was he? Couldn't the old rascal remember to watch the time? She'd said three o'clock on the dot and she meant it. This meal wasn't going to wait for anybody. Mott was poised to topple the turkey from the table and she knew him far too well to think he'd give up after only one try.

"It's outside for you, mister. If you can hold your horses for a couple hours, I promise you'll feast just as well as me. Now, out ya go."

As the front door swung wide, something fell to the ground and caught Penelope's eye. Bending over to pick it up she realized it was a slip of note paper with a crooked piece of tape at the top. She read it quickly before she could jump to any conclusions.

"Penelope, forgive me, but I just received a very important phone call and I'm leaving tonight to take care of it. As soon as I return you'll get a full explanation. I know what this meal means to you. You already have my humblest apologies, but I'll say them again when I get back. Please trust me on this one. Ben."

Penelope told herself to trust him. She told herself to be rational. If it wasn't really important he wouldn't have done this to her. But goddamn it, how could he do this to her! Goddammit! Goddammit! Goddammit! All that work, all her plans. For nothing. Nothing! She crumpled the note in her hands until it was as small and crushed as possible and then she flung it across the yard. Then she changed her mind, walked stiffly towards it, picked it up, and tore it into little pieces. And then she stomped on it, on all the tattered little pieces that lay on the ground. But she was far from being satisfied. Penelope headed straight for the house, for that perfect meal sitting so perfectly in her kitchen in its arranged, perfect order. She grabbed the first two bowls she saw, went straight out the back door towards the cliff edge, and over the side of the hill went a mountain of green peas and a slew of potatoes. On her next trip she grabbed the gravy and the stuffing. These two she

poured over the side together, watching a stream of golden brown sauce batter against great clumps of stuffing. Next came the cranberry sauce and both pumpkin pies. By this time she had a growing pile of dishes at her feet and the ground looked a splattered fall canvas: reds and greens and browns all mixed together in a satisfying display of waste. The last and most satisfying trip of all was now at hand -- the turkey! She took care to balance it against her chest so as not to overturn it before the moment was right. She looked out over the side of the cliff, its slope now a testament to disaster, and she was almost sorry for this bird that it had to meet such an ignoble end. It really was a grand turkey. One last look at its moist, buttery skin and then it was flying through the air for the first and only time in its short life. Penelope let the platter fall at her feet, a little overcome by her histrionic display. But soon she realized, much to her astonishment, that she was far from through. She thought a moment, calculated what would give her the most satisfaction, and headed straight for Nettie's stable.

She'd had a score to settle with this horse since it had thrown her mercilessly on the ground a few weeks ago. By God, she was going to get on the back of this horse and she was going to stay on. No more nice Penelope. No more patient Penelope. She would make it curb to her will whether the horse liked it or not!

As Penelope led Nettie outside to the training ring that Ben had set up, it began to rain. Penelope barely noticed. She was so intent on her task that nothing was going to stand in her way. Closing off the ring, she sidled up to Nettie's front, put her hands on either side of Nettie's massive head and looked her straight in the eye.

"I'm going to conquer you, horse. You just try and stop me."

They were brave words and Penelope had a fire raging in her like she'd never had before, but each time she tried to get up on Nettie's back, she was bucked off. Again and again and again and still Penelope kept at it. Raging against the wind. Raging against the rain. Now crying, but still stubbornly insistent that she would make it onto the back of this horse!

After too many tries and a body now covered in mud, Penelope collapsed in exhaustion and tears. She was huddled on the muddy floor of the ring, Nettie behind her flicking her tail lazily, unfazed by Penelope's attempts, unaffected by the rain. Penelope just sat and cried, cried all over again every tear she'd shed since she came to Jack Hill.

It was a while before Penelope gathered herself up off the ground. She wavered like a young colt on her weak legs. The sky was dark now, fully engaged in the rainstorm that was pelting the hillside with a vengeance. Penelope wanted badly to leave Nettie out in the rain all night, but she knew she would do no such thing, no matter how angry she was, and she led the arrogant beast back to its stable, tail still flicking lazily.

Once she finally made it back home, Penelope realized how truly dirty she was. She stripped by the light of the moon and let the fresh, cool rain run over her body until all the tracks of the mud and the hurt and the tears were washed away. She stood there by her back door - spent, shivering, naked in the rain. The image of her wedding came to her unbidden. It begged her to pay it attention.

*As Penelope walked down the aisle in her simple, civil ceremony wedding dress, her thoughts were not of love, but of who really was this man that she was marrying. In those twenty or thirty steps, leaning heavily on her father's arm, him unable to match the rhythm of her steps, the danger of her situation became clear. She was marrying a stranger. But the moment she reached Jack her clarity faded, and she let herself fall into the blue of his eyes. When he said, "I do," she was sure she heard love. When she said it in turn, she was sure she heard the future, echoing her words favorably. Jack was no longer someone she didn't understand. He was now her husband. That made everything clearer, didn't it?*

*As Penelope and Jack walked back down the aisle, she ignored the clamminess of his hands and the hesitancy of his step.*

*"I'm a little...nervous," he whispered down to her.*

*Penelope whispered back, "That's okay, my love. I'll be strong for the both of us."*

Sitting in the fridge was a bottle of Dom Perignon champagne that Penelope had forgotten about earlier, and was therefore not congealing at this moment on the hillside with the rest of the meal. Still naked, still dripping wet, she popped its cork, took a deep swig, and tucked it under her arm as she headed for bed. She was going to get drunk, and then she was going to fall asleep and hopefully not dream of anything at all. There was nobody to stop her.

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# PART III:

DECEMBER

## Chapter 17

It was just passed noon when Ben walked tentatively to Penelope's front door. The screen had been left slightly ajar and it now hung crooked from its hinges. Just inside the door, water and various windblown articles were pooled and Ben cringed at this evidence that the storm which raged last night had not been successfully kept outside. It raged inside as well.

Penelope was curled on top of her sheets nude, strands of long, blond hair twisted around her and an empty bottle of champagne clutched to her chest. The top-quilt had been thrown aside and its pattern of smiling people was twisted grotesquely.

"Benjamin you get out of here this instant or I'm going to throw this bottle at you and don't think I won't." Penelope croaked out, her eyes still closed. Ben moved quickly, trusting her words, and shut the door behind him. She wasn't going to take this nearly as well as he'd hoped. Damn, what rotten timing for his son to suddenly appear in Oregon and want to talk about the past, about Louisiana, and all those memories he'd worked so hard to forget. Just when he thought he might start trying to hold onto this family, his old one decides they want him back. Damn rotten timing! He just wished he could pretend he didn't know that one day the past would have to be reckoned with, and that for all the miles he'd run, just like Jackson, he'd brought his family right with him, just like Jackson.

Penelope managed to clothe herself some hours later, groaning with the pain of her first hangover. It took more than twenty

minutes for her to make it to Ben's cabin, when the walk should have taken five at most. Her knock was light but insistent, and she scrunched her eyes against the sun as she waited for Ben to open the door.

"Hello, Penelope. Do you want to talk in here or outside?"

"Wherever it's darkest and quietest."

"Well, that means here so come on in."

The inside of Ben's cabin looked much as one would expect it to from the simple porch, two unadorned windows, and outhouse that one approached outside. It was one room large with a kitchen and table at one end, a bed opposite, just to the left of where Penelope entered, a fireplace, rocking chair and rug on the far side of the room, and a row of hooks that stretched on either side of the front door. Various clothing, tools, and supplies hung from the hooks in disarray, but the rest of the room was clean, tidy, and functional -- a cabin he neither spent much time in nor particularly liked. It was used only for certain necessities and the rest of what he needed he got from the outdoors. Work was his companion. It let him forget.

Penelope moved slowly over to the bed and laid down.

"You can tell me now. And it best be good. I'm pretty much totally angry at you."

"Yah, I'd gathered as much."

"Just tell me, Ben. No stalling. No long story."

"Well, the thing is, Penelope, it is a long story. It's old history of mine I've tried to forget.."

Penelope put her hands to her forehead and tried to think past its ceaseless pounding.

"I don't think I can take a long story right now Ben, so do your best to make it simple."

"All right. Just let me sit down here." Ben moved to the rocking chair by the fireplace and slowly eased his body into its worn frame.

"Well, I guess I'd better start with the basic facts. Penny, about twenty-one years ago, I left my family. My family in Louisiana. I don't mean my parents, I mean I have children, and a wife. Four of them."

"You have four wives?" Penelope couldn't resist, even in her state.

"No, no. Four children." It took a second before Ben realized she was teasing. "Penny, you're not acting very angry, or even surprised."

"I know. I guess your surprise just kind of blends into all the other things you've told me. It's not so easy to faze sweet, little Penelope anymore."

"Apparently," Ben said, himself fazed.

"So, tell me how this relates to your 'important' phone call."

Penelope's voice was matter-of-fact.

"Well, two nights ago, Martin called. That's my youngest boy. He told me he wanted to talk about the family. About maybe patching things up. He was staying in Florence and asked me to meet him there. Penny, I hadn't spoken to him since he was a little boy."

Ben stopped there, ashamed of the truth of his words.

"What's the name of your wife?" Penelope asked more softly.

"Letitia. Letty." Saying her name was hard. It stuck in his throat.

"Is she together with your son on this?"

"I don't know. Martin said she was, but it's hard to imagine. Letty wasn't the type to forgive like that. Still, twenty years...." Ben looked down at the floor.

"So, do you know what you're going to do?" If Ben was going to leave, Penelope wanted to know about it now.

"I don't have a clue." The weight of things unsaid made the air suddenly feel heavy.

"Well, was it at least good seeing your son?"

Ben shifted in his chair.

"It was good, but it was hard. It was real hard."

Ben's voice trailed off and Penelope sensed his deep shame over the exposure of his past. The conversation was over. Neither of them was ready to deal with what Ben and his son had actually talked about, nor were they ready to face the possibility that he might be leaving Jack Hill.

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Penelope was startled awake from her nap by the unusual sound of the phone ringing.

"Hello? Papa?"

"Unless your dad looks a lot like a fat, pregnant lady, I'm afraid it's not him who's callin'!"

"Oh. Nikki. Hi." Penelope sat down, expecting a long and hopefully harmless phone conversation.

"So, Hello, doll. How ya doin'? I just wanted to warn you that I'm right outside your front door."

Penelope swirled in alarm to see Nikki in front of the living room window, a cellular phone clasped between one pudgy shoulder and her drooping jowls. Her left hand was waving frantically in the air and her smile was innocent.

After sufficient waving, Nikki stepped inside, giggling through the phone before tossing it into the depths of her front pocket. Nikki was enough to discompose anyone, not to mention Penelope, who was fresh from a nap and not used to visitors anyway. Nikki had to take Penelope's phone out of her hand in order to snap her out of her trance.

"Whoa, I sure took you by surprise, didn't I? Penelope, you there? Earth to Penelope???"

"I'm sorry, Nikki. I'm not myself these days. Please come in, er, I mean, sit down."

"Thanks darlin', and don't you apologize for nothin'. This morning I just spaced out during hide and seek with Randy Lee Jr.,

and the poor thing, he hid for an hour before I remembered to come find him. I tell you, sometimes us women just got to screw our heads back on with all that we have to worry about. I bet you're wondering why I'm right this minute sitting in your kitchen, aren't you?"

"Well, Nikki. I imagine you're going to tell me."

"Oh, honey, 'aint that the truth! I do love to talk! Well, I'm here for two reasons, really. The first is that my husband, you know, Randy Lee, he bought me this expensive cellular phone for my birthday so that I could call my friends and talk 'whenever and wherever'. I think he's tired of listening to me gab on and on to him. Our phone lines have been down since the big storm and they haven't been fixed yet. I don't know what other important work the phone company has that it takes them this long to repair their lines! Anyways, it really was sweet of him to buy it for me. It's not like we've got money growing on trees or anything. He must have saved up for it. Oh! What a dear! So, anyways, I decided to call you and see how you were doing up here, but then I heard a horrible rumor in town that Jack's gone and run off and I just had to hear the truth from you in person."

"Oh. Uh...." Penelope scrambled for a thought.

"Y'now, I just realized how rude I'm being. If you don't want to talk about it, I totally understand. Some things are better left to the people involved. I know that. I'm just such a busy body sometimes I can't resist."

"No Nikki, it's okay. Actually, I think it would be good to tell you, and it's all right to let the town know if you want to. Jack did leave me and I don't have a clue when or if he's coming back."

"Oh my dear, that's a hard one. That sure is a hard one. I'm sorry it had to happen to someone as sweet as you. Have you thought about what you're going to do? Oh, what a stupid question, Nik. Of course, she's thought about it. I mean, do you know if you're going to stay on at Jack Hill, because if you are you've got all the support in the world from Randy Lee and me. We take on friends like family and just won't let 'em go!"

"I don't know, Nikki. Everything's so...I just don't know what I'm going to do." Penelope slumped in her chair, her hands folded under her chin.

"Honey, I'll make us some tea. You just keep on talking and we'll straighten this out for sure."

Nikki raised herself from her own slumped position quicker than anybody eight month's pregnant should be able to. She moved around Penelope's kitchen with an assurance that belied the fact she'd never been there before. Soon, water was set to boil, tea packets were found, sugar and cream were set in front of Penelope on the table, and then the tea itself.

Penelope watched her with envious eyes. Nikki moved with the confidence of someone who doesn't wonder who she is -- who just knows. Nikki energized a room, enlivened it, and Penelope saw herself, in contrast, struggling to simply be noticed. Nikki commanded the walls and Penelope faded into them. And beneath her hyper, nosy, and somewhat overbearing exterior, Nikki managed

to give the impression that she was more full of love for you and the world than you thought was possible, which was why it was useless for anyone to try to resist confiding in her.

"When Jack left, I was so hurt and confused. I moped around depressed for weeks. But then, I just got tired of moping and decided I would have to figure out what to do. I asked myself what I really wanted, and what I really wanted was Jack, so I decided to stay. It seemed like as long as I was loyal and had enough faith for the two of us, then he would return. Eventually, he would have to return. That was the way I was going to fight it. Can you imagine? Just waiting and hoping. That was my big plan. But, things began to get complicated. Everything wasn't as I thought, and I realized that I'd been lied to. Those things you told me at the supermarket? They were a total surprise."

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry if I opened a can of worms for you."

"No, Nikki. What you did was right. You believed I had a right to know. And I did."

Nikki patted Penelope's knee with her chubby hand and smiled for her to continue.

"Well, finally, I got Ben to tell me the truth and boy, was there more of it than I thought. I guess I began to think, okay, everything's out in the open now, it'll be easier for me to re-evaluate what to do. But it isn't easier, Nikki. It's so much harder, so much more complicated. Before, I just thought about myself and what I wanted. Now I'm thinking about what Jack needs and what Ben needs and about Elizabeth and Jackson and his father in Oklahoma. I'm all over the place. It's like I'm part of something bigger now."

Penelope took a sip of tea and thought over her words. She hadn't realized this was how she felt until she opened her mouth.

"I think it's still worth it to fight for this marriage. At least, that's still what I want to do. But my old way isn't working anymore. I'm through with waiting."

Nikki squealed in appreciation.

"Good for you, doll. Lord knows patience is a virtue, I ask God for it every day with my boys running around like they do, but sometimes all your waitin' is just wasting time."

"That's it, Nikki. That's exactly how I feel. The thing is, if there was a map, I'd follow it. If there were directions, I could read them, do what they said. But I'm on my own here."

"Honey, you mentioned your father earlier. Is he someone you could go live with if things don't work out?"

"Oh, papa? Absolutely. He would love it. But, I don't know. Something inside me rebels at the idea of just going back home like that. I feel older now, different. I'm not sure I'd be happy there anymore. But just as often as I think that, I tell myself I'm crazy and I should just pack up and go home."

"Penelope, when I got married, I didn't think about Randy Lee's family either. I felt like it was just him and me in our own world and nobody else mattered. But I was wrong to think that. His family became my family the moment I married him, and he got my family too, poor thing. Each of my kids has got something in them from Randy Lee's parents and his grandparents, and so on and so on. And Randy Lee, well, he sees the world the way his family taught him to see it. How am I supposed to learn how to live with him if I don't

learn what he learned about livin' from his family? So, if you decide to go home, honey, I don't blame you one bit. Things might be better that way. But if you want to stay and keep trying at this thing like you said, you've got to get to know Jack's family. And that means getting to know the old bastard up on the hill. Even if Jack does come home, things won't be good between you until family stuff's straightened out."

"How am I supposed to do that, Nikki? It doesn't seem fair that Jack gets to run away and I have to deal with his problems."

"Well, honey, that's marriage. You inherit each other's problems."

"But Nikki, I can't do it alone. Jack's got to at least be willing to be here with me. It's just not fair."

"I hate to say it, but marriage isn't about what's fair. As far as I can tell, marriage is about loving as much as you can and just doing what needs to be done to keep that loving alive. You know that some healing, some movin' on needs to be done in Jack's family for you to have a marriage. If Jack can't or won't start that healing, you're going to have to. That's the proof of your love, honey. It's okay if you don't love him that much. That just means you made the wrong choice in who to marry. But if you made the right choice, then you're going to have to fight a lot harder than you have been."

Penelope's eyes teared up and she wavered a shy, little smile at Nikki.

"It's funny, but when I got married, I just thought marriage was about love."

"So did I, honey. We were sure wrong, weren't we."

Penelope stood outside the Big House. Why hadn't she taken Nikki's advice and come to talk with Mr. Pennyroyal while she was there? Why did she think it was important she do this alone? Penelope looked at her surroundings while trying to summon the courage to knock on the door. The house was nothing but a cold, grey stone. How it had ever been built way up here on the hill she had no idea. At its base, the house was overrun with moss. The higher walls of the manor were stained with the tracks of rotten ivy. The sodden greens that attempted to show this fortress the stubbornness of life hung listlessly, wilted, beaten down by the deadness of the stone.

Penelope felt the wind swirling about her, moving in communion with the swirling of her head. It was time to face this man, this father-in-law who she had never met, never spoken to, but who had been at the side of her and her marriage every moment since she'd come to Jack Hill. She didn't know if she could do anything to heal the past and gently pull its grip from her marriage, but this was something new to try, somewhere else to fight than in the lonely recesses of her faith.

The door's brass knocker vibrated through her hand as it sounded against the studded wood. Penelope hung onto it for support. She stood there several minutes in silence, the stubborn echoes of the knocker still moving through her hand. She knocked again, three sharp thrusts of the brass against itself. Still no response from inside. Penelope dared herself to see if the door was

unlocked, moving her left hand slowly towards the handle, her right still clasped to the knocker. In those few seconds of slow, careful movement, she promised herself that if it opened, she would step inside. She was here to fight with the courage her husband lacked. She would not run away, afraid like him. She would not!

The handle depressed easily and the door's hinges swung it wide. All of a sudden, she was standing in the open doorway. One foot she put inside, turning and looking behind her. A final glance and then she brought herself fully into the dark opening. She shut the door behind her.

---

Sitting on the steps of Penelope's front porch, Ben fingered the old harmonica in his lap as Penelope stroked the fat cat in hers. It was a rare and beautiful December day. The wind sat as they did, taking a respite from the cold, and the sky shone bright blue, no rain in sight for miles around. Penelope drew her quilt closer, tucking it under her chin and over her hunched shoulders.

"Ben, why haven't you played these last couple of weeks? I miss it."

Ben stayed silent, turning the harmonica over in his hands, and over and over again, feeling it as if for the last time.

"You know, I've held onto this thing for years as my only reminder of Louisiana. The music, the sounds of that time, that place, was the only thing I allowed myself to remember. After a

while I forgot specific memories and specific songs. I just played the South. Just played sweet Louisiana.”

Ben put the harmonica up to his ear and cocked his head to listen.

“Sometimes I swear I can hear the old sounds in here. The gin-joints and bars with their sounds of laughter, stomping, shouting, and clinking. Horns, drums, and singin’ to the piano. The sounds of the best goddamn jazz anywhere. And other times I tilt my harmonica another way, and I hear the backroads, the lonely guitars, screen doors slamming close, children’s feet padding through the dirt, and the heat, the buzz, that wet, heavy buzz of the heat that’ll make you crazy in summertime. Sometimes I swear I can hear it all right here in this old harmonica. But everything’s changed now.”

Ben brought the harmonica back down to his lap, thinking deeply, uncomfortably.

“Ben, your son asked you to go back with him, didn't he?”

The question hung in the air, heavy, like that sweaty, southern heat, and Penelope had her answer. Ben was thinking about leaving, leaving for good, and suddenly she realized his problems were as great or greater than her own. He was no longer an ally in her fight. He had his own battle with the past to wage. She was truly on her own now.

“Ben, I went to go talk to Mr. Pennyroyal yesterday.”

Ben looked up quickly, startled by her news.

“I knocked, but he didn’t answer. So, I went inside. It wasn’t locked. I called for him, yelled loud enough I know he had to have heard me, but he didn’t move from wherever he was to come see me.

I've decided I'm going to go back tomorrow, and again and again until he faces me. I'm not afraid of him. I'm more afraid of what will happen if I don't make myself do this. Ben, he was once your friend. If you want to come with me, that's your right. But I don't want any advice or any warnings. This is really my fight now and I need to find my own way through it."

Ben was stunned by the strength behind her words, by the determination with which she was struggling to find a future for herself and her marriage.

"You've changed, Penelope. You're not the same girl Jack brought here five months ago. You're not a girl at all anymore. Where did all this courage come from?"

Penelope laughed, at once celebrating the confirmation of his words and at the same time mocking his assurance that it was courage and not folly which was leading her on.

"It's courage if you say so, Ben. But maybe it's just that I need something to do. Patience isn't getting me anywhere."

"No Penelope, you're wrong. It's more than that. And you have changed. Really changed. If Jack could see you now, sitting so fiercely, almost proudly, here on this dirty porch, why he wouldn't recognize you. He wouldn't see any trace of Elizabeth in you that's for sure. It's strange, you don't even look like her anymore. And that means this place is yours now, if you want it."

Ben slowly eased himself up off the porch, groaning from the weight of old bones.

"I'm not going to try to stop you from confronting Jackson. Maybe one day this really will all be over."

With those words Ben left, bowing slightly as he turned away. It was only after watching him stride down the hill that Penelope realized he had left something at her side. He had left her his harmonica.

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The next morning Penelope set out for the Big House with an unexpected sense of optimism. The more she thought about this man, this recluse, who had lived shut up in his dark house for years, shut off from all community, the more Penelope began to grow in power. She grew taller, weightier, stronger. Her strides became longer. Her determination tangible. She was, at last, present.

The house was quiet and shadowy, just as it had been the first time she had entered, just as one expected it to be. Hallways and staircases led off in every direction, promising dark passages and haunted depths. Doorways brooded silently like tall butlers, ever loyal to their obsolete stations. It was almost inconceivable to Penelope that a human being would voluntarily live in this dead world. As far as she knew, Jackson Pennyroyal had rarely ventured outside after his son left, and not at all in the last few years. Would he look like that grotesque mask she glimpsed in the window that one night? And where was the barking dog? Where was the protector?

She didn't want to stand there gathering dust in the hallway, so she began to explore. The first staircase to her right looked promising, its adjoining wall decorated with oils done of the

surrounding hills. They had clearly been commissioned, each landscape oriented to display the might and dominance of Pennyroyal Manor. It loomed in the sky over ocean and hills alike, cast absurdly in the role of a grand, glowing beacon to the masses below. Penelope ran her hand over the gilt frame of one of the paintings, wondering how desperate the painter must have been to submit to such inartistic demands by his employer? But then, Jackson Pennyroyal had been schooled in the art of moneyed manipulation and such a commission would have inevitably been done to his precise instructions.

The first door at the top of the stairs was locked, and Penelope stifled the alarm that her quest might be thwarted by something as simple as a locked door. The next two doors were also locked and her alarm grew to fear. Each door along the wide hallway, counting eight in all, she found locked in turn. It was only after stomping her foot angrily on the floor that she found an answer. The foundation under her feet had been hollowed out. It sounded its thin, wooden echo after two more successive stomps, inducing her to kneel down and feel along the edge of the running carpet for a possible opening. Her fingers probed the length of the thick weave, accumulating years of dust under her fingernails, until finally, her thumb snagged on a rough groove. She quickly rolled back the carpet and to her surprise, a hatch in the floor was indeed revealed. This was all so bizarre. She felt -- as she had felt once before standing in front of this house at night -- that she was in a movie. Who on earth was this man who hid secret passages in the floor, refused to go outside, and simply withered away in his dark, lonely domain? Hearing about his

strange past was quite different from experiencing its strangeness in the present. Whoever he was, she was now related to him, of that she was unfortunately sure.

The hatch wasn't locked, but its own considerable weight served as a deterrent. Penelope had to position herself for as much leverage as possible, her hips bent over her haunches, her knees splayed wide, and her shoulders horizontal with her head. Her every muscle, joint and limb strained upwards from the handle, eyes closed tightly, veins fully loaded with red, bulging blood, until suddenly the hatch snapped free from its hinges and Penelope flew backwards onto the hard floor. She took a moment to compose herself, shaking her head free of its concentration, and was astonished to see a gay, lighted opening staring brightly back at her through the floor.

The secret hatch was connected to a staircase which led down to an underground hallway, but this one the antithesis of its dark, dusty brother upstairs. Penelope marveled at the sight of soft, almost feminine wallpaper, as smooth and shiny as if it had been pressed just yesterday onto the rough walls. Deep footfalls of plush, white carpet met Penelope's every step, and four doors, two on each side, stood open for her perusal. There was nowhere the sense of dry gloom that pervaded the rest of the house. Penelope felt as if she were in the secret recesses of someone's longing -- here was sweetness, sorrow, and a delicate, aching vulnerability. Noticing an elevator shaft at the end of the hallway, fit for a wheelchair and crippled legs no doubt, Penelope remarked to herself that here was the Jackson Pennyroyal she sought after, here was the man she needed to see, the evidence of something redeemable.

Penelope moved silently into the room on her left, the depths of the carpet and the insulation of the walls masking any sound. She might have been surprised at what she saw inside, but she was not. It was the mark of the only thing she clearly understood about her father-in-law. Here, in a room filled from floor to ceiling with unopened, unused gifts, some wrapped in colorful paper of airplanes, puppy dogs, and soldiers, others decorated with only a bow, was displayed the evidence of a father's desperate love. A man who installed secret passageways and hid from her in the gloomy depths of his house, she feared she couldn't deal with. A man who deeply, disastrously loved his son was another matter entirely.

It was a sad, little room, Penelope thought. The tricycle didn't move. The toy train had never run, never whistled. The picture frames were unfilled. She counted thirteen frames aligned against the wall, each with a consecutive number carved into the wood. Penelope realized they were the years Jackson hadn't spent with his son, hadn't seen enough of the face that should have graced these frames in order to take a picture of it. It was a room created in desperation, and it had failed. She moved quickly back into the hallway.

The second room, just across, contained only one item: a woman's dresser. It was as delicate as the woman Penelope presumed must have owned it. Attached to the top of the dresser was a cracked, oval mirror that reflected Penelope's face grotesquely in its glass. She smiled into her image and was horrified to see it turn her into menacing hyena. Large, crooked teeth slanted up on one side in a spittled sneer. Quickly, she frowned, and then cast her

eyes away from the mirror entirely. The rest of the dresser top displayed various items of female vanity: a silver hairbrush and hand mirror, a French perfume bottle, a pink face powder crusted with chalky white dust, two tubes of rose lipstick, and one last item of startling impact - a small, framed photo of what appeared to be herself. She had never imagined she resembled Elizabeth so precisely. It took her quite aback, and if she hadn't felt so strongly the impenetrable, mausoleum quality of the room, she would have removed the picture and placed it in her pocket to take home.

The top three drawers of the dresser were empty, opening easily at the pull of Penelope's hand. But Penelope had to kneel on the floor to pull open the bottom drawer, one much deeper and heavier than the rest. It was also empty except for a folded silk nightgown and a wedding band. The small, gold ring had been placed delicately in the middle of the gown, and it looked harmless sitting there in its gentle valley of silk. Penelope fingered her own wedding ring, remembering the man who had placed it there. It wasn't until her wedding night that she felt the weight of the band on her finger, the weight of what it truly meant.

*Jack laid down next to his naked bride and rested his hand on her ribcage, just below her breasts. It was their first night on Jack Hill and there was silence all around. No rain. No wind. No weather at all.*

*"Do you believe that I love you?" he asked her.*

*"Yes, I do. Of course I do. And I love you, too. What's wrong? Your voice sounds so strange?" Penelope turned towards him, his hand shifting to the curve of her hip.*

*"It does?"*

*"Yah, it does."*

*Jack stalled for time, moving his hand up to her shoulder, caressing her skin softly.*

*"I've never slept in this bed, did you know that?" he told her.*

*"Are you kidding? I know so little about you. But I thought this was where you were raised?"*

*Penelope looked into his eyes, noting the dark bags that had formed under them.*

*"No...this was my mother's house."*

*Penelope heard the hesitancy in Jack's voice. She knew they were treading on fragile ground and she tried to appear as if this rare bit of information wasn't vastly fascinating.*

*"Oh. Really?" she said.*

*Jack heard the enthusiasm in her voice. She was trying to hide it. He knew this was hard on her, but he couldn't tell her about his past. He just couldn't. That would ruin things for sure. Make it more complicated. He wanted her to make him forget, wanted to start over. 'Then Jack, why did you bring her here?' he asked himself.*

*"Say, do you want to take a walk with me? The ocean is beautiful at night. I used to do this a lot when I lived here."*

*"Now? At night? But we don't have any clothes on!"*

*Jack laughed his mischievous laugh.*

*"Ha ha! So, I see you are at my mercy!"*

*Jack scooped Penelope up into his arms and then settled her lightly on the floor. He grabbed the quilt from off their bed and wrapping it around them both, ushered her outdoors. An occasional well-placed pinch got her laughing, and soon Penelope forgot her shyness.*

*When they reached the side of the hill, Penelope was awestruck. At night, the ocean was vast, larger than anything she'd ever seen. It seemed to stretch on forever in moon-lit waves.*

*"It's really beautiful, Jack. No wonder you used to come here at night."*

*Jack pulled Penelope tighter into his arms and maneuvered the quilt so that it covered them from head to toe. Only Penelope's pale face and his weathered one peeked out from beneath.*

*"Jack, we're going to be okay, aren't we? I mean, we love each other, and everything will get easier in time, won't it?"*

*Penelope felt the intimacy of the moment allowed her this insecurity.*

*Jack leaned down and kissed her, tried to make her forget the question he didn't know an answer to. She didn't forget, but she let him try, and neither of them mentioned her question again. Nor did they return together to the ocean at night.*

*Penelope returned to herself in front of Elizabeth's dresser, and covered her ring finger protectively as she rose from off her knees*

and headed back through the door. This second room she shut, pulling the door soundlessly closed, leaving it to its sad peace.

Two rooms now remained, and Penelope carried on, though her emotions were growing increasingly confused. Diagonal to Elizabeth's room was what looked to be some sort of closet or storeroom. Its door was ajar, but not enough for her to see more closely inside. Penelope had the sense that she should leave it be for now, even imagining she heard that portentous hum which whispers through all important places. Reality was growing to be an absurd concept here in this sweet, underground graveyard. She felt that her intuition was her best guide through, so she turned away from this third room and headed towards the last door.

The door opened into a large, masculine library. Three long, tall walls were covered by books of every variety, and the requisite mahogany desk, red leather armchairs, and stout, brass lamps were arranged in typical order. The comfortable familiarity of the room, of all rooms like it where the intellect reigns decorously over messier emotions, soothed her into forgetting the strangeness of where she was. She sank tiredly into the depths of one of the armchairs and closed her eyes for several long, quiet moments.

A metal clink outside the room woke her suddenly. With certainty she knew she was being spied on, and with a flutter of her pulse she realized it must be Jackson Pennyroyal. What to do? Should she speak? Why did he still hide behind the wall? She sensed any word might send him into even further hiding and searched her mind for a course of action. Looking wildly around the room for some sort of useful tool, she noticed a book lying on the

small table next to her chair. It was bookmarked in the middle of the text and the leather of its cover looked well-oiled from years of eager fingertips. On a burst of sudden inspiration, Penelope took the book in her hands and began to read. Page after page she read, her voice soft and pleading, urging Jackson to participate in this safer, deflected communication. Reaching the end of the chapter she came to a quiet stop, her voice lingering on the last word. She held its vowels as long as she could, but the word slipped away. She lifted her head from the book slowly, her eyes heavy with anticipation for the sight to come, and then there he was, standing crippled in the doorway, his sun-deprived skin and his grey hair presenting a vision of skeletal frailty. Jackson raised his own head at the cessation of her voice and looked her deeply in the eyes. His shock at her appearance registered with a quick snap of his head and a slight stumble backwards. The metal braces on which he supported himself shook with the strain. One more deep, questioning look and then he turned slowly back around and walked away from the door, back to his hideout, back beyond her reach. Contact had been made, but its consequence remained as yet a mystery, and Penelope let him struggle towards the elevator without her interference.

Penelope stayed contemplative in the library for some time, unsure of her next move in the strange and delicate game that had commenced. In the end, she decided simply to return the next day and repeat her performance. Perhaps her next recital would draw him out even more. Perhaps in the midst of *Robinson Crusoe* she would find some advice for her own precarious situation.

Stepping outside the front door, Penelope noticed a dog asleep at her feet. How old, how old and tired he looked. How far from the raging jaws she'd imagined that one cold night. How far everything was and would be from what she had imagined.

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## Chapter 20

A routine was soon established between Jackson and Penelope. After Nikki had left for the day, Penelope would head towards the Big House, *Robinson Crusoe* in one hand and the other in a fist. Every day she would enter by the opening in the hallway at the top of the stairs, entering as if by secret rather than consent. Never did Jackson show her the other way in and she never asked. Once seated inside the underground library, she would wait expectantly for Jackson to appear. Always she felt that he might not come. Even after several weeks of tentative communication, nothing much more than glances and nods, she still feared that he would again retreat, return to his hiding and his world of the past. She measured the success of her endeavor by his appearance. After the first couple of days, he appeared in a cleaner set of clothes. Two days after that, his hair was brushed. Soon all those small evidences of neglect that one learns to look away from on the elderly -- those fallen pieces of food, now dried and stuck to a collar; those mismatched socks, one navy, one black; that old leather belt that's at its highest notch but still fails to keep old pants bunched around newly slim and bony hips -- all began slowly to disappear. Now able to peer through the decay, Penelope was amazed to discover Jackson's relative youth. She remembered that he was no older than Ben, though there appeared at least a decade of difference between the two.

On the last day of her reading, the last page finally turned, Penelope waited for some sign to indicate what her next move should

be. Her previous attempts at conversation had failed to evoke a response, and moreover, Jackson's eyes would flee to the door at any mention of the past. The two of them sat there, listening to the nervous silence, both unsure how to continue now that their clever deflection had reached its end. Penelope stood and paced through the room, trying to look like she was in control of the situation. Jackson shifted in his wheelchair, tugging purposelessly at the blanket over his legs. Finally, Jackson decided to act, and while Penelope's back was turned, took out the notepad which hung from a string around his neck and wrote on it his first words to her.

I used to read that book to Jackson Jr.  
when he was little. It was his favorite.

He left the note on a side table next to where he had sat, and with Penelope's back still turned, slowly wheeled himself from the room.

Penelope heard him go and her eyes filled with tears. She had failed. She had failed! She should have tried harder, refused to read to him unless he attempted some kind of communication. Or, maybe she shouldn't have come at all. But she had seen some change, hadn't she? As Penelope moved despondently towards the door, she spied the note. She rushed towards it and savored each spindly word like the sign of water in a desert. She even read it out loud.

I used to read that book to Jackson Jr.  
when he was little. It was his favorite.

They were beautiful words, weren't they? The most beautiful words.

Penelope ran out of the library to see if Jackson was still in the hall. She checked each one of the other three rooms, stopping at the third, that queer humming closet, for her first true look inside. What greeted her was more astonishing than anything she had seen so far. Along one wall were stacked rows upon rows of craft supplies. Fabric, wood glue, scissors, thread and wire all stuffed into plastic tubs and shoe boxes. Along the other wall was wedged a long table, covered from front to back with miniature buildings and figures, built by painstaking hands into the perfect reproduction of a grand, midwestern manor. It was all there: tiny, painted shutters; a thumbtack-sized doorbell; individually built roof tiles, window panes and real glass for the windows themselves. Even the weather vane had a convincing rooster on top. But most startling of all, were the people. They had been sewn. Lovingly adorned with hand-made aprons, skirts, hats and shoes. Their faces were all the same, a fixed half-moon smile and black button eyes, but their bodies sported delicate and unique ensembles - coordinated to appear the perfect servant, perfect wife, perfect father, perfect son.

As Penelope picked up one of the child dolls, she noticed Jackson standing woodenly in the doorway. He had written another note and was holding it in both hands, trying to decide whether or not to give it to her. Penelope replaced the doll and moved towards him, her eyes fixed on his bent head. At the wheels of his chair she kneeled, taking one hand and gently touching his chin, lifting it up so that he could meet her gaze. Even more gently she pried the note

from his steely grip, pulling each of his fingers one by one from the paper.

Jackson was transfixed. He received her ministrations with the intensity of a stage-struck child. In that moment he was lost. His daughter-in-law had found a way inside.

The note read: "I know it looks odd, but I learned to sew from my mother. It was the only thing she would do with me."

Penelope knew not to tear up, knew not to acknowledge the drama of the moment. She nodded her head calmly, brusquely, and then patted his hands lightly as she rose.

From then on, their meetings took place in this little closet of a room, one or both of them sewing while the other 'talked'. Penelope was surprised to find that for the moment, she didn't have any desire to speak directly of the past. Her once accusatory endeavor no longer seemed appropriate. Their conversations meandered, from here to there with unconscious grace, his memories too painful to be ordered, her questions unable to be broached. In two hours they might exchange twenty words, and it was more than enough for both of them. Time spent in quiet communion was their real message to each other. It wasn't until after Penelope spoke to Nikki one night on the phone that the subject of bringing Jackson out of his isolation was realistically considered.

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"Jackson, are you aware that today is the twenty-third?"  
Penelope pulled a pink thread through the miniature dress she'd

started and waited for Jackson to nod his head up and down or side to side.

“That’s funny. *I’d* totally forgotten we were this close to Christmas.”

Jackson arched an eyebrow at the nervousness in her voice.

“What are you getting at?” he was asking her.

“Jackson, Nikki asked me if I wanted to have Christmas with her and her family. I thought it might be nice but I suggested we have it at my house. That way Ben could come. I don’t think he would go if it was at Nikki’s. And that way...you could come too.”

Penelope felt the lightness drop out of the bottom of the room. Jackson froze in his chair.

“I think it’s time, Jackson. I think you’re up to it. And, I think it’s necessary.”

Every nerve in Jackson’s body screamed for him to back away and hide. He fought unmoving against his fears. His knuckles clutched white. His temples throbbed.

“This is a horrible idea,” he wrote.

Penelope forced herself to pull another thread calmly through its hole.

“Do you really think so? Would it be so horrible to be a part of life again?”

“Yes, it would be,” he wrote back.

Penelope pulled her thread taught and then kept pulling and pulling, making the material bunch around a tightened knot.

“Dammit, Jackson. You should be more than this. You are more than this. Don’t you want to find your life again, yourself again?”

“No, he destroyed everything. This is who I am now. Accept it, or never come see me again.”

Jackson stiffly put his notepad back under his sweater, indicating that the conversation was over.

Penelope was overcome with frustration. Suddenly furious for the weeks she'd spent accepting his isolation and being a part of it. He was more than this. He had to be.

“You think this discussion is done. Uh-uh. I don't think so.”

Penelope grabbed the sides of Jackson's wheelchair, pushing him out into the hallway and into the elevator. As the elevator whirled up to the ground floor, Jackson furiously scribbled notes to Penelope.

“What are you doing?” “Stop it this instant!” “I'm warning you, Penelope!” “Just leave me alone!”

He tried to angle his body so that he could hold the messages up to Penelope who was standing directly behind him. Each note he proffered, she tore in half, otherwise trying to look disinterestedly into space.

When they arrived at the ground floor, Penelope realized they were in the back of the kitchen. Pots and pans were strewn chaotically over countertops in what Penelope could only assume was Nikki's rebellion. The slick, tile floor of the kitchen and the parquet in the hallway made for a quick roll to the front door. Penelope flung it open, her purpose lending her unusual strength, and she wheeled a horrified Jackson directly into the sunlight. Even with the muted December rays, Jackson felt like he was in a nuclear explosion.

The light shattered his eyeballs, broke through his pores and rushed into his bloodstream. He hadn't felt daylight for eight years.

Penelope was shocked by what she had just done. Did she have the right to force him like this? To force him into life? She started to walk away from Jackson's chair so that she could think a little, plan a little, but as she moved, Jackson's hand shot out and grabbed her wrist like a vise. Their eyes locked, and with a start she registered the terror in his eyes. Quickly he took up his pen and wrote: "Please don't leave me." But the note was superfluous. His eyes had said it all.

"I will stay if you come to the Christmas party. If you try to live again, just for that one night. But you must really try. Only then, I'll stay." Penelope lied with absolute sincerity.

Jackson made quick work of his answer, a child's anxious nod meant to placate the unpredictable mother. He was terrified by her proposal, but all the more terrified that she might leave. This time he was the one patting her hands and looking into her eyes, trying to make himself a part of her life before he had to recreate his own.

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## Chapter 21

It was Christmas Eve and the house she had at times cursed for making her feel like an impostor, now glowed with the promise of home. She and Ben had spent the better part of the day decorating for tomorrow's get-together and now that dusk had fallen, they surveyed their efforts by moonlight. Penelope was entranced. Ben was taciturn. Penelope supposed it was over whether or not to leave Jack Hill, and did not press him. She feared his decision either way. Either she lost him, or he lost himself.

"Ben, where do you think Elizabeth went?" Penelope asked. Ben, who had been making garlands for the tree, upended his bowl of popcorn onto the floor.

"What?" he croaked out.

"I know this is kind of out of the blue, but I was just thinking about her running away that morning. I mean, where did she go to? Did she have it all planned in her head or did she just wander around until she found a life again? Was she scared? Was she hungry? What was it like for her leaving her husband, her son and her best friend, her whole world, just in one moment, and then never turning back, never making contact with any of you? In some ways I think what she did to her son was worse, much worse, than what Jackson did. But in other ways, oh, I can see how she needed to get away. And that took courage. But she should have at least written him. At some point she should have written him. It's driven Jack crazy, hasn't it?"

Ben had stopped picking up the popcorn in the middle of her speech. Talking of Elizabeth so openly was disconcerting to him. He and Jack never mentioned her explicitly and not in such honest terms.

“I tried never to ask myself those kinds of questions, Penny. You're right, it did drive Jack a little crazy. It would have been too much for me. To keep wondering, keep hoping.”

Ben leaned back on his knees and looked away into the darkness of his memory.

“You know I loved her. I really did. Not like Lettie. That was different. A husband kind of love, I guess. With Elizabeth, oh, I don't know. She was this high-bred English lady. Like nothing I'd ever seen before. And you never forgot that about her. I was the help; she was the mistress of the manor. We were friends, but we were never equals.”

Penelope knelt on the floor and helped Ben pick up the last kernels of the white popcorn.

“Ben, I wasn't going to ask you this, but are you thinking about leaving? You've been pretty quiet today.”

“Well, I've been thinking about it some, but that's not why I've been quiet. I've had a knot in the pit of my stomach all day that something bad's gonna happen.”

“Ben, don't tell me things like that! Everything is finally going kind of okay. Don't jinx it.”

Penelope spoke jokingly, but there was fear in the pitch of her voice.

“You’ve grown up, Penelope. I figure you can hear this now. Before, I never felt comfortable telling you the truth. You were so wrapped up in your own version of it. But now, now you can handle it.”

Ben slapped her lightly on the back like a tired, old coach, and set himself back in his chair by the fire. Mott lay behind him, strewn precariously along the length of the chair’s top cushion. Penelope was mulling over her thoughts, adding the last few touches to the Christmas tree. Nat King Cole crooned from the kitchen radio, and Ben was relieved to find that the knot in his stomach had loosened some. For a moment, just a moment, he felt content. Moonlight, a cat, a song, and Penelope. In this moment, he was content. It would have to be enough to last him through his journey, for he’d finally decided he couldn’t stay.

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The next morning, Penelope hurried over to the Big House to get Jackson ready for the big day. She brought with her a present that she wanted to give him for his re-entrance into the world, though she knew realistically that nothing was going to make this day easy for him.

“Good morning, Jackson. Did you sleep well last night?”

Jackson nodded drowsily, apparently not much of a morning person.

“Nikki told me you waited here in the dining room for your breakfast. Is it okay with you if we have it together this morning?”

Jackson smiled broadly, obviously warmed by Penelope's wish to share this morning with him.

"Merry Christmas, Penelope," he wrote.

"Oh! Merry Christmas to you too, Jackson. I guess with all this excitement I'm a little discombobulated. Thank you for doing this today. It means a lot to me."

"I know it does, Penelope. That's why I'm doing it."

Jackson took a series of prepared notes out of his breast pocket and motioned for Penelope to read them as he wheeled away into the kitchen.

"Mrs. Cummings told me you gave her the morning off and that you would cook breakfast for me. I have decided to cook for you instead. Do not be surprised. I harbor certain talents within my meager frame of which you are unaware. Sadly, culinary skill isn't one of those talents. But Mrs. Cummings has informed me that a basic morning breakfast should entail little difficulty and she has schooled me in a few techniques. Believe me, it was wise you were not present to witness our attempts at civil behavior. Perhaps you can picture the contretemps that ensued. Nevertheless, I believe I managed to learn certain scraps of information between fisticuffs and soon you shall see the fruits of my labor. I do this as much for you as for myself. I have decided to take seriously your suggestion that I reengage in a, how shall I put it, normal life. If I have reveled in anything these past years, it has been precisely my abnormality. One does not disengage from life and the living by maintaining reason. I have sought to keep the world out or rather to protect it from me, and I have too well succeeded. In that, as in many things,

you are right. My son chose wisely. Perhaps he has enough wisdom left over to return to you and beg your forgiveness. That is something all Pennyroyal men have never had the courage or the honesty to do. By now, you will surely have had enough of my drivel, and I should have had enough time to gather breakfast. If I've timed it right, I should now be reentering the dining room with our meal."

In fact, it took Jackson another few minutes before he was ready, but Penelope was grateful for the chance to gather herself together. The man who had written in such a manner would not appreciate her overemotional tears. Wiping her eyes with the back of her dress sleeve, Penelope did her best to look grateful, but not too grateful. They were still on tenterhooks with each other and she feared a misspoken word.

When Jackson did return, it was only to bring the first wave - a silver tray bearing teapot and creamer. The next wave brought another tray, this time with coffee and a sugar bowl. The third wave brought toast and the fourth and last, something which resembled scrambled eggs. At each reentrance, Jackson gave a tentative smile and then avoided Penelope's glance as much as possible. But when the full breakfast was at last assembled before them, he broke out into a proud grin, beaming for all the world like a man who had been informed of the birth of his first child.

Their meal evolved in silence. Jackson didn't mention his embarrassment over what he'd written. Penelope didn't mention the awfulness of the scrambled eggs. When they had both reached a

second cup of tea and no conversation had yet resumed, Penelope chose to present Jackson with her gift.

“Jackson, this is a present to inaugurate your first Christmas celebration in what I suppose is many years. Go ahead and open it, and then I’ll tell you the story that’s behind it.”

Penelope slid a small, white box across the tablecloth. It was adorned with one riotous Christmas bow and tendrils of red and green ribbon. Jackson was trying to remain composed himself and his hands shook as he slid the bow off the top. He couldn’t remember when he had last received a present. He truly couldn’t remember. Inside was a silk paisley handkerchief that he might once have picked out for himself in the days when such things mattered.

Penelope watched his discomposure with a secret smile. So I am not the only one to be surprised this morning, she thought. The handkerchief brought back complicated emotions and she was glad it was now in the hands of its rightful owner.

“One of the few things Jack ever told me about you, about his father, was that you always carried an expensive handkerchief. I don’t know why he told me that. That of all things! But he did, and I pounced on it. One day when I was shopping for some things for the wedding, I saw that handkerchief in a store. I cried out to myself, ‘Now, that’s a Pennyroyal handkerchief!’ I bought it then and there even though it was pretty expensive, and brought it home to Jack as a present. When he opened it, he went white. He told me it reminded him so much of you that I should keep it and maybe one day we would place it on your grave. Jackson, he had told me that

you were dead. I give it to you now because you are alive, because you still have the chance to change what this little piece of fabric can make your son think of you. Jack was right. This does belong to you. So does your life. I hope you will receive it in the spirit in which it is given.”

Silence lay thick and ominous between them, and Jackson’s stricken face was frozen to an icy pale. Penelope feared that she had ruined the camaraderie of the morning, but felt sure that her overture was important. Still, she tried to make amends. With a forced laugh she said, “Well, regardless of all that, I think you’d look quite dashing in it if you wore it to the party.”

Jackson was both astute and desperate enough to follow her cue, and with a forced smile of his own, he wrote: “Then I must wear it indeed!”

After Penelope bid Jackson good-bye, thanking him profusely for the meal and informing him that she would be back to get him later that afternoon, she reexamined the wisdom of her gift. It had been chancy, but if Jackson would rise to the challenge, there was real hope for him and perhaps for her husband. If he retreated, then she would at least know the limits of his willingness to come out from under the past. She would know the limits of her own relationship with him. Penelope walked the path back home with tentative, questing steps, but her chin was raised. Pointed to the murky grey horizon, her chin was raised high.

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Penelope heard them coming long before they arrived. It wasn't precisely a family she saw at her doorstep; they looked more like a gang - four young boys quivering with unpredictable energy, an eight-months pregnant woman clearly capable of violence, and a menacingly big-boned husband lurking two steps behind. Even in their holiday best, they were a group you prayed to be on the good side of. Thankfully, Penelope was, and she ushered them inside with a quick "Merry Christmas" before the boys tore off her screen door in their squirrly haste. Each family member had been entrusted to carry one meal dish and one present, excepting Randy Lee who carried a bag over his shoulder like Santa Claus. It was full of a variety of things, from gifts to food items to bottles to sports equipment. It was necessary that the boys have something to play when they got too squirrly, and a change of clothes for them to do it in.

Ben raised from his seat in the corner to come greet the new arrivals, excited particularly by the presence of the boys and wary particularly of Nikki, whom he'd never seemed to get on the good side of. He and Randy Lee seemed indifferent to each other but they struck-up a conversation about the weather nevertheless. Before Nikki could set to talking herself into a lather, Penelope extracted Ben from his conversation, "Yep, it sure looks like rain," being the point at which she decided her intrusion would be met favorably.

"Ben, I have an important favor to ask of you. Will you do it?"

"Do I get to know what the favor is?" Ben rejoined.

"Well, I'd really rather you agreed first."

“That’s always the way, isn’t it? Well, sure, Penny. Whatever you need, my dear.” Ben clearly had no conception of the type of favor Penelope was asking for.

“Ah, glad to hear it, Ben, because I’d like it very much if you would go get Jackson and bring him down here to the party.”

Penelope waited for Ben’s eyes to jump back in their sockets.

“I’m guessing this isn’t a joke.”

“No, it isn’t at all. He’s ready to come. I’ve all but dressed him myself. And Nikki and the boys knew about it before they came. Please Ben. I’m asking you for a reason.”

Penelope placed her hand on Ben’s arm in a supplicating gesture.

“Penelope, I know why you’re asking me to do it, but don’t you think you’re pushing things too far. Inviting Jackson down here is trouble enough. If I go get him, that’s just gonna add fuel to the fire.”

“Ben, he’s been changing. Little by little. Not just because of me, but over the years, living all alone in that house. And you’ve been changing too. I think you’re ready for this, and anyways, I think I deserve for you to do something nice for me even if you don’t want to. Don’t you think I deserve that?”

That last guilt card Penelope threw with desperation, sensing Ben’s deep reluctance. It worked marvelously however, and Ben looked shamefaced.

“Well, okay. I’ll do it for you. But if you ask me, it ‘aint gonna go too well.”

"Will you at least try, Ben? I mean, don't start swinging as soon as he's in strike range."

Penelope faked a punch to Ben's gut. Ben gave her a wink in return.

"You're askin' a lot little lady, but I'll give it my best shot."

As soon as Ben walked through the door, he saw Jackson wheel anxiously towards him from the front living room. Jackson had a stiff part in his hair, what looked like some sort of rouge on his cheeks, and an elegant handkerchief in his breast pocket. Even Jackson's crippled legs looked like they were filled with new blood. Ben wasn't quite sure how to take it all. Jackson scribbled out a note and handed it to him. Ben hesitated over whether or not to take it. Jackson's hand began to quiver in the air as he felt Ben's reproach, but he was determined to communicate. Ben at last took the slip of paper and held it up for his eyes to read.

"Benjamin, I watched you walk up the house from the window. It gave me time to adjust to the idea of seeing you again. If you want to take your time now and stare at me, you can. I know I'm quite a sight to look at these days."

The words were nothing like what he expected. They were conciliatory. They were kind. They were even *funny*! Who was this man?

"Uh, I'm okay," Ben said, "let's just go to the party and get this over with."

Jackson was hurt by Ben's words, but he understood them. He scribbled a second note and handed it out to Ben.

"I realize being in my presence is distasteful to you, but do at least give Penelope the credit for having the power to influence people for the better, even people so degenerate as me. Let us act civilly towards one another for her benefit, shall we?"

Ben nodded stiffly, accepting Jackson's proposition. They managed a silent truce just up until Penelope's door. There, overcome by the intimacy of being driven through the night by an old friend, Jackson turned and tried to pat Benjamin's hand. The tender gesture threw Ben off balance and he pulled his hand quickly away.

"You don't need to touch me, old man. You're desperate enough already." Ben said cruelly. He hadn't meant to be cruel, but there it was. Old hatred dies hard.

Jackson turned slowly back around in his chair, adjusted his handkerchief, and looked straight ahead into the night. When Ben knocked soundly on the door, he flinched. When the door opened, he trembled.

The wait until Ben arrived with Jackson was far harder than Penelope had anticipated and Nikki took advantage of Penelope's inattention by launching into a variety of provocative subjects. Inadvertently, Penelope managed to catch a phrase now and then like "afterbirth removal" and "planter's warts." Needless to say, she wished even more fervently for the speedy arrival of the two men.

When Ben wheeled a quite dapper Jackson Pennyroyal through the front door of the house, Penelope at first was taken in by their manufactured calm. As soon as the last bit of rubber wheel passed

the threshold, however, Ben lifted his hands from the chair as if they'd been burned and bolted away from his charge to the opposite end of the room. Jackson looked like a small, cornered animal.

Penelope expected this sort of entrance, though she had hoped otherwise, and she was prepared to set things aright. Smoothly, she sauntered over to the record player and put on Christmas music to cover up the awkward silence, threw a ball at one of the boys to get them distracted away from staring at the old man in the wheelchair, tossed Mott into Ben's insecure lap, and then headed straight, but oh-so-slowly, for Jackson.

It took a couple of glasses of Champagne and a long, painstaking conversation of passed notes full of questions about Nikki's boys, the food, the decorations, Ben, the changes in the house, a wedding photo of her and Jack, and anything else Jackson could think of that would keep him focused, keep him thinking, keep him from being overwhelmed by all this noise, energy and motion, before he began to feel comfortable. His shoulders never relaxed the whole evening, but his face eventually stopped trying to compose itself and his wheels found the compass of the room.

Nikki and he managed to be cordial, if not warm. To Randy Lee he seemed particularly solicitous, most likely in sympathy for what he assumed was a daily ordeal of marriage. Randy Lee took it all in stride, or perhaps was simply unaware of the complexity of the game which was turning its wheels all around him. The boys were an occasional problem. Jackson followed them with his eyes as they leapt about the room, obviously entranced, but as soon as one would catch his gaze or try to approach him, he would visibly flinch and

then turn away, unconsciously curling his body into the chair like someone threatened by violence. Mostly, however, the night was a success for Jackson, and Penelope felt a queer, motherly pride in his accomplishment.

Of Benjamin, she was more worried. Sometime in the middle of the celebration, perhaps when the boys were noisily opening their presents, he had slipped outside. Penelope noted his absence with alarm, not having failed to notice his surly frown as it grew increasingly throughout the night into a full grimace. It was upon his return to the party, when Penelope saw a face so much more distinctly horrible than anything he had sported earlier, that she felt true fear. Even in his relation of painful memories, Ben had never looked so terrifyingly sad.

When he reached her side, Ben motioned Penelope to follow him to a secluded corner of the room. His words were taught and brief.

"Elizabeth is dead. Jack found her. The letters explain it all."

Ben handed her two letters and then left again, grief racking his body.

The first thought that came to Penelope was that there were far too many notes carrying important information lately. She started to laugh, but stopped herself before it came out hysterical. In her husband's small, precise script, the first letter, the one addressed to Ben, read: "Ben. How can I say this? My mother is dead. I found her grave two weeks ago. She died on May 10, 1986. Apparently, there was some indication that she chose to be cremated and her remains are encased in a mortuary in Chicago. I found her

by total chance, Ben. After all this time, it was just dumb luck. I won't come home until the first, so you have some time to deal with this on your own. There's a spot, I think you know the one, where she once told me she wanted to be buried. It's all I can do for her now. Jack."

With shaking fingers, Penelope tore open the letter addressed to her. The script was larger, not as neat. It read:

"Penelope. By the time you read this, Ben had explained why I am coming home. I don't know what to tell you about this. If you are still on Jack Hill, then maybe you will hope that I'm coming home to stay. I'm not sure yet if I can, but I am going to try. If you've left, then I will find that out when I arrive. And I will know that it is entirely my fault our marriage failed. You never did anything wrong. The fault is all mine. At the risk of showing you the depths of my self-pity, I apologize for not warning you that you were marrying only half a man, and I apologize in advance if I ever hurt you again. Until the first, Jack."

Penelope couldn't believe what she was reading. The stupidity, the sheer stupidity of the man she'd married! How dare he think he could get away with such a letter! By God, she had a mouthful to say to him the moment he stepped foot on Jack Hill. Jack Hill. He was coming home to Jack Hill. He was actually coming home.

It was all Penelope could do to put the two letters in her dress pocket and focus on the celebration at hand. Her bravado was of course a cover up, but her identity had grown large enough in these last three months to include a measure of self-respect, and Penelope was not about to allow Jack to ruin all that she was attempting to

create this evening, all that she was attempting to enjoy. Jackson had lived through an ascent into the real world and was currently teasing Mott with a line of popcorn string. The Cummings, however garrulous, were infusing her home with real spirit, and she felt an immense warmth towards them for their ready acceptance of her into their bright, noisy life. And though Ben was currently nursing a great hurt, he was part of her happiness too. They had come a long way together in three months. Who knows where they could end up in another three? With a sigh she wished herself a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. She had really earned it this year.

As Penelope pushed Jackson back up the hill towards his house, she wondered what it was he was writing so furiously on his notepad. They were nearing his door, but he was so absorbed in whatever he was writing that she stood in the moonlight and waited for him to finish. The stars were out tonight. Orion, her favorite, hunted just over her head. She breathed in deeply the salt air and listened to the wind as it blew past her ears. These things were familiar to her now. These sensations meant home.

Jackson had been watching Penelope as she drunk in the night. He nervously held onto a pile of notes he'd written and forced himself to let go. Penelope looked at the stack of paper that Jackson had thrust into her hand. Over the top of the first page, he had scrawled 'Last Will And Testament.'

"What's this, Jackson? This better not be what I think it is."

Jackson pointed for her to read through the notes.

"Penelope, after eight years of almost total seclusion in my own home, I have finally realized on one night out in the world that I deserve better. No matter what I have done in the past, I deserve to have a future. I feel it is imperative that I also make clear who deserves what among my relations. I have treated none of them well except you, and even you had to put up with quite a bit from me in the beginning. My son has never received what he deserves from me. You, my daughter-in-law, simply deserve more than I could ever give you. My best friend deserves to be rewarded for a lifetime of service that has never been shown appreciation. And my wife, she deserves what I deserve. The chance to begin anew. The chance to start our childhoods over again. The chance to grow up and never meet each other."

Here, Penelope paused.

"Jackson, before I read anymore, you must know something I just learned tonight. It is sad news. Jack found his mother's grave a few weeks ago. She died in 1986."

Penelope looked away from Jackson and let him adjust to the news privately. She continued to read as he shook silently.

"Much of what we deserve cannot be given us. But some of what we deserve can. In that vein, I have set out to write my Last Will and Testament so that there will be no confusion as to who I believe deserves what. To my son, Jackson Pennyroyal III, I bequeath no money, and formally disown him from the Pennyroyal line. This is the nicest thing I can think to do for him. To my wife, Elizabeth Margaret Spencer, I bequeath half my estate. The other half I bequeath to Benjamin Cornelius Langely. A stipulation of their

entitlement is that they must administer the estate together. To my daughter-in-law, Penelope Pennyroyal, I specifically bequeath my crafts collection, and anything else she desires is hers to do with as she wishes. I bequeath these sums and items not to create divisiveness among my relations, but rather to attempt to rectify what I have taken from them in the past. It is neither my intention to have my word be taken as law. Any stipulation in this document may be challenged by any of the aforementioned persons. Lastly, it is my desire that upon my death, Pennyroyal Manor be destroyed. Only items of emotional value should be spared."

Once Penelope finished reading, she noticed that Jackson was looking at the sky with a smile on his face. Sitting in his chair in the dark, with the stars overhead, and a blanket over his lap, he looked remarkably innocent. And young. Penelope took his hand in hers and studied him in the moonlight. As they held hands, she leaned down and whispered in his ear, "So you are my father-in-law. It's nice to finally meet you."

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"Hey, little lady, you awake?"

Ben's normally gruff voice spoke softly into Penelope's ear.

"Heyyy, Ben. I guess I was dozing in my chair here."

Penelope covered a large yawn with her hand and tried to focus two tired, slightly inebriated eyes.

"I didn't expect you to make it back tonight."

Ben moved to sit on the arm of the chair in which she was sprawled.

"I didn't expect to either. But, I must have been walking in circles because I kept returning to your doorstep," he teased.

"Oh, that's nice. It is a lovely doorstep."

"Are you drunk on Egg Nog, Miss Penelope?"

"Oh, definitely not. Most definitely, definitely not." *Hiccup.*

"M'hmm. I can see that you aren't."

Ben smiled tenderly down at Penelope and ran his fingers through her nest of blond hair.

"My dear, I have come to tell you that I'm leaving. As soon as Jack gets here and Elizabeth is taken care of, I'm heading off. My son's told me I've got a family to reckon with, and I've decided he's right. So, off I'm gonna go."

Penelope's eyebrows quivered into the bridge of her nose. She was just lucid enough to pretend to be tipsier than she really was.

"No, you're not really gonna leave, are you?" *Hiccup.*

"That's got to be the way of things, my dear. I don't want to leave you, but I've still got to go."

"Then take me with you! I'll be good, I promise. I won't say nothin' or do nothin'. I'll just sit in the back of the truck and, and I'll listen to your bad jokes and laugh at every one! How 'bout that!"

Ben laughed softly at her childishness. It was sweet to be able to see her like this, open and vulnerable again..

"Now, Penny, you've got to stay here and take care of Mott for me. He'd be lonely without you and he couldn't come with us. He uh, he'd get carsick."

Penelope pretended a great pout.

"Oh, well okay, then. I guess I'd better stay. But you'll call won't you? Not write. I don't want any more letters, not one more piece of paper! But a phone call would be just perfect. I love the phone, don't you?"

"Sure I do, honey. Penny, I'm going to lift you and put you in bed, okay? Here we go, upsy daisy. Oh! You've gotten so big!" he teased again. "Here we go, through the door. No, bring your feet through the door. That's right. There we are. Okay, 1-2-3. All right, all snug in bed. Now, we just need to pull up the covers and you're set for a good night's sleep. A long night's sleep, I hope. There we are."

"Ben?"

"Hm?"

"Will you give me a goodnight kiss before you go?"

Penelope turned her head so that one, pink cheek peered out from under the enormous pillow.

"Sure, honey. There you go. Sweet dreams, Penelope."

"Goodnight, Ben."

"Goodnight, Penelope."

And as he left she quietly said, "Good-bye, Ben." And she wept.

It wasn't until later the next morning, witnessing the full aftermath of her living room and setting Jackson's two letters on a table before her, that Penelope began to consider the remarks of last night. So, Ben was leaving. Perhaps it was time she go, too.

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# PART IV:

JANUARY

## Chapter 22

Jack held his mother's copper urn before him, like a peace offering, as he got down from his truck and walked into the yard that held his entire family.

To Jack's immediate left stood Ben, his arms loosely crossed. A slow-burning pipe simmered in his mouth and his eyes were hooded, wary. Ben's own truck was positioned at the mouth of the road - packed, secured and ready to leave Jack Hill. After a life spent on the hill, he had only a few bagfulls of junk to show for it. Rusty tools, an old coat, an AM/FM radio. Not much more than that.

Jack approached Ben first, eyeing his packed gear suspiciously.

"Hello, Ben." Jack's voice was unusually formal.

"Hey, son. Welcome home." Ben eyed Jack in turn, noticing the loose hang of his clothes.

"I see you're packed up to go somewhere."

Ben laid it all out at once.

"Yep, I'm leaving as soon as we bury your mother. My youngest boy called and the family wants me to spend some time in Louisiana. I'm not coming back here 'cept to visit."

Jack was stunned. This was not what he wanted at all.

"Your mind's set on this, Ben? You're really leaving? I never thought you'd leave." Jack's voice sounded young and insecure.

"My mind's set, Jack. This has been a long time comin.'"

Jack stood at a loss in the middle of the yard. Ben shook his head in disapproval.

"Jack, you fool, why don't you go greet your wife?" Jack turned his head around to look at Penelope and Ben gave him a push in the right direction.

Penelope had been watching her husband closely. He looked thin, she thought. Thin and tired. She watched him walk over to Ben and then surveyed the pile of suitcases at her feet. Two big ones full of necessities. Two small ones full of keepsakes. It would be obvious to him that she was leaving as well. Maybe it was too upfront. For the third time that day, she wondered if she should have kept the suitcases inside.

As Jack headed towards his wife, his legs began to stiffen and his knees buckled in place. She was packed. Why was she packed? Was she going with Ben? How could he stop her from going? Did he have the right to try? Jack stopped walking and tried to catch his breath. His heart was beating too fast and he felt dizzy. He looked at his feet and felt the ground rolling beneath him.

No, he could do this. Jack lifted his eyes and looked directly into Penelope's. What was he doing standing here? This was Penelope, this was his wife.

Jack walked straight for Penelope, his steps much quicker than before. When he reached her, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her for all he was worth.

Penelope surfaced before Jack did.

"Well, that's all fine and good, but what now?"

"W-What?" Jack sputtered, still affected by the kiss.

"That's all fine and good, but what now, Jack? Are you just going to kiss away our problems? That didn't work before, in case you've forgotten."

Jack looked at the woman standing just outside his arms, making sure this was really his wife.

"Penelope?"

"Yes, it's still me, in case you're a little confused." Penelope tried to quell her own beating heart, wanting to appear as unaffected by him as possible.

"Look, Jack, here's the situation. You think you are this poor, what did you call it, 'half-a-man'?, who married this pure, innocent girl. But, she was just too good for you, and your misguided heart couldn't take it. So, you ran. But now you think because you've blamed yourself enough for what you did that the girl will forgive you and then she can finally make you all better. That's all just...what's the word, Ben?"

"Bullshit," Ben shouted out.

"Exactly. That's all just bullshit. I'm a real person here, Jack. Not an image of goodness. I'm not blaming you. I believed in the image too. I didn't marry a real person. I married my hero. Neither of us exactly got what we wanted, did we?"

Jack stared at his wife. She was suddenly so interesting, and dangerous.

"But, you see Jack," Penelope's voice turned soft. "I really do love you. Do you feel the same? Only say it if you mean it, Jack."

Penelope waited on baited breath for his answer. Ben gave her a wink from over Jack's shoulder.

Jack knew his answer right away.

"Yes, I do love you, Penelope," he said in a tone of voice she'd never heard before.

Now was the critical part. Penelope locked her knees to keep her from buckling under.

"Okay," she said in the same soft voice. "Now that we have that straitened out, here is what I have to say. I am leaving you, Jack. Not forever. Not for a long time. But for a while. I do love you, but I'm not ready to be married to you. And I don't think you're ready to be married to me. These last three months have been an eye-opener. I guess I have you to thank for the opportunity. And what I discovered is that the girl who wanted to marry you is not me anymore. The love's no different, but what I want from it is. So, I'm basically putting you between a rock and a hard place, which is where you put me. You get to either wait for me, trusting in my love for you, or you get to leave again. Doesn't feel like much of a choice, does it?"

Jackson had stumbled slightly backwards and Penelope directed him over to the porch steps where they sat down next to each other.

"Tell me again why you're doing this?" Jack asked her with a catch in his voice.

"It's not revenge, Jack. Truly, it's not. I'm going to leave for a while because I need to explore who I am now. I need to decide if I truly want to be married to you. And you need to decide the same thing."

"But I do want to be married to you," he protested.

"No, you want someone to heal you. That will never work. Don't you know you have to heal yourself? Ben, you know that, right?"

"Why do you think I'm packed, little lady?" Ben took a deep drag on his pipe.

"See, Ben knows what I'm talking about. I haven't totally gone off the edge, Jack. What I'm talking about includes getting to know this man."

Penelope motioned her arm around the corner and out stepped Jackson in his metal leg braces. He wore a nervous smile and a sign around his neck that read: Welcome Home, Son in red and gold letters. He had more dignity in that moment as a man, than in the cumulation of his experiences as a Pennyroyal.

Jack was overcome. He wanted to shy away from his father, but nothing about the man in front of him made him afraid. He suddenly felt like a pawn in a game he didn't understand, bound by rules no one had explained. This was all so different from what he'd expected.

Penelope let all that she had thrown at Jack sink in. She watched him struggle. She watched him sweat. Maybe a small part of her was enjoying this. Who knows? The old Penelope would never admit to such a thing, much less think it. The new Penelope? She'd have to wait and see.

"Penny, were you planning on coming down in the Chevy with me?" Ben asked.

"No," she said mysteriously.

"Well, how do you plan on making it down, then? On Nettie's back?" Ben chuckled at the thought.

Penelope just smiled.

"Are you telling me you're gonna try to take her down with the wagon? Are you crazy, girl?" Ben's chest had pushed out in alarm and he walked towards her with his finger waving in the air.

Penelope just kept smiling.

"So, you tamed her, did you?" Ben smiled proudly. "I expected nothing less."

"Let's just say she and I tamed each other." Penelope said. She winked at Ben, smiled at Jackson, and looked deeply at her husband. She would go. She would go. She would go, and hope, and he would build a life in her absence. She would go and she would be loyal. He would stay and *they* would fight.

The End