

CHAPTER 1

In which I say good-bye

My three-year-old niece, Lulu, sits alone at the kitchen table, eating a frozen waffle. It is early, barely sunrise, the day I have to turn myself in to juvie.

“Hi, Lulu,” I say as I stumble in. I haven’t really slept.

“Hi, Aunt Sadie,” she says back.

I pour myself a cup of coffee that smells hours old and sit next to where Lulu perches sideways on her booster seat.

“Where’s Carla?” I ask.

“Bathroom.” Only she pronounces it *baffroom*. It kills me how she says that.

Carla is Lulu's mom, my older sister. Lulu and Carla have spent the night so they can say good-bye one last time. Usually it's just me and my mom in the house. Carla and Lulu have an apartment downtown that Carla pays for with child-support money. She's twenty and waitresses at Friendly's, even though most of her coworkers are stoned most of the time and she promised to get another job. Lulu goes to day care. Her dad is twenty-five and apart from the child support is out of the picture.

"What about Moo-Moo?" I ask. That's what Lulu calls my and Carla's mom.

"Bedroom."

"Did Moo-Moo make the coffee, or did you?"

Lulu smiles. "Moo-Moo made it."

"You want some?"

She shakes her head. "Too stinky."

"Oh, yeah," I say. "Like monkey poo."

Lulu laughs at that.

"Aunt Sadie?" she starts. I know what's coming next, because she's already asked me a hundred times. "Where you going again?"

I try a bite of her frozen waffle, which isn't bad. I wonder if they have them in juvie. "It's one of those missions they send me on sometimes," I say. "For national security. Fighting terrorists."

She blinks, waiting for a real answer.

"It's just this place I have to go to because I got in trouble," I say. "It's called juvie. It's kind of like day care for

big kids, only I'm not allowed to come home at the end of each day. But I'll be back soon. And I'll think about you every day. I promise. And I'm pretty sure they'll let me talk to you on the phone."

She's quiet for a minute, chewing on her waffle. I'm afraid she's going to cry.

Then she asks if I can bring her back a Happy Meal.

"Yes, Lulu," I say, relieved. "I will bring you back a Happy Meal. It just might be a while."

Carla walks in right when I say that. Her hair is a wreck; she's wearing socks and an oversize T-shirt I haven't seen before. She looks gaunt, her face all sharp edges and shadows. I remember when she used to be so pretty, back before she met Lulu's dad and started hanging out with druggies. She starts crying, which gets Lulu crying, too.

"I'm so, so, so sorry, Sadie," Carla says, also for about the hundredth time, while I try to comfort Lulu, who doesn't even really understand why she's crying.

"You sure have a funny way of showing it." I nod toward the Pop-Tart wrappers strewn across the counter. I'm wondering if maybe Carla smoked something last night after the rest of us went to bed and then raided the cupboard for anything sweet. "You better get rid of those."

But Carla doesn't move fast enough before Mom comes in, looking tired. And angry.

She brushes past Carla without saying anything, then grabs the wrappers and throws them in the trash.

She must have already seen them when she came in earlier to make the coffee. She just wanted to make sure Carla knew.

She gives Lulu a big hug, then turns to me.

“Is that what you’re wearing?” she asks. I have on jeans and a sweatshirt.

“Yes, ma’am.”

She shakes her head at me this time. “Couldn’t you at least put on a dress?”

“Can’t,” I say, though the last thing I want to do this morning is disappoint Mom. “I’m riding over on the motorcycle, remember?”

She doesn’t respond, just pats Lulu on the head. “I’m off to work, Bug,” she says. “You be good today, all right?”

“OK, Moo-Moo.”

Mom turns to me. “Are you sure you don’t want me to drive you over there?” she asks. “I can take you on the bus, before I start my route.” Mom drives a school bus in the mornings and afternoons and then works evening shifts at Target.

“No, that’s OK,” I say.

She sighs hard and then pulls me to her. She smells like cigarettes, which I know better than to comment on.

“You be good, too,” she says. “And just, you know, just—”

She can’t finish.

“I’ll come on visiting day,” she says, and kisses me on the forehead. She grabs her purse and brushes past a

sniffing Carla without saying a word. The sound of the door slamming makes me jump.

I don't have to show up at juvie at any particular time, so I take Lulu back in the spare bedroom to help her get dressed for day care. I pretend I can't figure out which hole her head goes through in her shirt. "No, Aunt Sadie!" She laughs. "That's for the arm!" I pull Lulu's pants on her next, and *then* her underwear, which cracks her up, too.

Carla is sitting at the kitchen table when we come out, Lulu finally dressed for real. Carla's staring into a cup of coffee, still disheveled, her hair still a wreck. "Could you clean yourself up already?" I say, harsher than I intend. "I have to go, and you have to get Lulu to day care."

I don't wait for an answer, just grab a bag of stuff I've packed. Carla catches me before I reach the door, though – hugs me and kisses me on the cheek and whispers some more about how sorry she is. I pull away.

Lulu follows me outside to where my motorcycle is parked. I bought it used last year when I was sixteen and got my license. I had to have some way to get to work, and Mom couldn't afford a second car. Plus I had wanted a motorcycle since the first time I'd ridden on one, back when Carla was dating this guy with a Harley. I loved the thrill I got when he let me ride on the back. Mom was mad at me at first, but since I used my own money, there wasn't too much she could say.

Carla stands at the back door and waves, still holding her coffee.

Lulu picks up a pebble from the driveway. “For you.”
I hold it in my hand. “Pretty heavy. What is it? Gold?”
“No,” she says. “A rock.”

I hand it back. “You better keep it for me while I’m gone. Will you do that? Keep it someplace special?”

She nods. Her chin quivers. “I love you, Aunt Sadie.”

I lift her up on the bike with me and hug her so tight I can feel all her bones.

“Love you, too,” I say.

“Love you three.”

“Love you four.”

“Love you more.”

I have one more person to see before I turn myself in to juvie: my dad. He lives half a mile away in a wing of Granny’s old house down a gravel road. Granny died three years ago, not long after Lulu was born; one of the last things she ever got to do was hold Lulu. She made Mom the executor of her estate, which wasn’t much besides the house, a big wood-frame place with a wraparound porch. Two engineers, a husband and wife, rent the main part of the house. But they spend most of their time commuting to their jobs up in DC, so aren’t around much. Dad got what was left, an addition off the side with a separate porch and entrance – enough room for him to do his hoarding thing. He also has access to three large sheds on his end of the property. There isn’t any mortgage, so the rent and Dad’s disability check cover his expenses. Either

Mom or I bring him groceries and leave them on the porch once a week. If he needs anything else, he leaves us a note in a Tupperware container, also on the porch.

I see right away that the renters haven't been mowing, though I got on them about it a couple of weeks ago. The weeds come halfway up the wheels on my motorcycle, which pisses me off. I make a note to have Mom talk to them about it the next time she comes by.

I wade through the weeds and onto the porch, squeezing past piles of junk. The wind picks up while I stand there by Dad's door, not knocking. It blows gently through the trees that surround the property and shade the house, and is probably my favorite sound in the world. I close my eyes for a minute and listen. It's like a symphony of whispers. I figure this might be the last time I hear it for a while, so I want to capture the sound and keep it with me as long as possible.

The wind dies after a little while and I finally make myself knock. I don't know how many times over the past three years I've done that and then waited and waited on the chance that Dad will actually answer. Floorboards creak inside, which could be him tiptoeing around, but which could also be the settling sounds of an old house.

"Dad," I say, leaning my head against the door. "It's me, Sadie. I just wanted to tell you that I'm going away today. I have to turn myself in to juvie. You remember. I told you all about it – what happened with me and Carla. And Carla, she's OK. She started going to AA and swears

she's going to keep it up while I'm gone. I know she's said that before, but I think she means it this time. She was so scared when she thought—" I clear my throat. "Well, anyway, I just thought you should know."

I pause, not sure what else to say. It isn't as if I need anything from Dad, or expect anything, which is good because Dad's not really in a position to help anyone these days, not even himself. But Granny always said that everybody has a purpose, even if you can't see what it is. Her purpose, the last years she was alive, was taking care of Dad. I can't figure out what Dad's purpose is now, except for wandering around pig paths carved in the towering piles of paper and junk he can't stop himself from collecting. But he's my dad, and even if I don't know what his real purpose is, I know that one of mine is to keep coming over here and checking on him, and I guess to be a good daughter, or as good as I know how.

"I have to go now, Dad," I say to the door. "I'll write you letters. Not that you need any more paper or anything." I laugh lamely. "I hope you'll read them. I hope you'll write me back."

I wend my way off the porch and am halfway to my bike when I stop. I change direction and head around the back to the toolshed. I fill the mower with gas and spend the next hour and a half cutting the grass. I do the weedy areas twice to make sure I get everything. Weeds have a way of lying down under a mower and then springing back up once you're past. I get sweaty in my jeans and

sweatshirt, but since the only place I'm going is juvie, I figure it doesn't really matter.

It takes me about fifteen minutes to get there – back down the long driveway from Dad's, through a couple of neighborhoods, ten miles north of town up a straight, wide, boring stretch of Route 1, past a trailer park and a couple of used-car lots and a bunch of abandoned businesses and old motels. All that ends after a while, and for the last couple of miles it's all trees and woods except for a lonely 7-Eleven. I try to turn off my brain and just enjoy the ride – the thrill of being on the Kawasaki this one last time, an open highway that's all mine, the high whine of the gears when I downshift going into a curve, the thrumming of the engine when I hit cruising speed, the chill blast of early-autumn wind that always feels like freedom.

I nearly miss the small juvie sign altogether – I'm going too fast to stop when I see it and have to turn back around. And then, half a mile down a narrow access road, there it is: the Rappahannock Regional Youth Correctional Facility. I sit on my bike in the parking lot and just stare at it for a while. It looks like my high school from in front, all red brick and green corrugated roof and tall, narrow windows no wider than my hand. The whole place sits on about five cleared acres surrounded by a thick tangle of central Virginia oaks and pines and brambles and brush.

I get off my bike and walk around. Along the side and at the back there's a thirty-foot chain-link fence

topped with barbed wire, and from there juvie looks even *more* like my high school: picnic tables, exercise area; short basketball court with a couple of bent rims; dusty vegetable garden; nobody in sight except the guard and his reflective sunglasses in the guard tower.

I'm glad to see the basketball court, even if it is just packed dirt and even though they don't have any nets. Coach kicked me off my Amateur Athletic Union team a week ago. The other players threatened to walk if he didn't let me back on the team – they said it wasn't fair, since I hadn't been convicted, at least not yet – but that never happened. Most of them called to commiserate with me for the first couple of days, then they texted, then my cell phone just sort of went dead.

I walk back to my bike and grab the bag of stuff I've brought – shaving cream, razor, deodorant, toothbrush, toothpaste, floss, and tampons. They told me I'm not allowed to bring in any personal items, but I assume that means no cell phones or teddy bears or whatever. I leave my helmet on the handlebars and hide the key under the seat of my motorcycle so Mr. Lewandowski, the auto-repair teacher at the high school, can send somebody to get the bike later. He said they'd take good care of it in his classes while I'm away. That's how he said it, too: "While you're away." As if I'm going on vacation.

Mr. Lewandowski and my dad were friends when they were in high school. My dad isn't friends with anybody

now, but Mr. Lewandowski still remembers him, and I think he feels bad that he didn't do something to keep me out of all this trouble.

I stand outside the juvie entrance for five minutes, one hand on my bike, the other shielding my eyes from the morning sun. A couple of blue jays are caterwauling from a tree nearby. The sky is cerulean, the air still crisp with this first dose of autumn. I can't breathe in enough of it, though I try and try. I hate the thought of giving it all up – the bike, the sun, the sky, the air. Haven't I already given up enough? Haven't I already paid the price for something I didn't even do?

Screw this. I grab my helmet and jam it back on, slip the key back out from under the seat, throw my leg over, kick-start the engine, and take off, gunning it out of the parking lot and down the access road back to the highway.

I could do it. I could keep on driving and not look back.

If I turn north onto Route 1, I can zip up to Coal Landing Road, then another couple of miles down Coal Landing past a cheap housing development to where the land gets wild again, and in five minutes I'll be at Aquia Creek, a wide tributary to the Potomac River. There is a certain copse of trees I know about with a lot of undergrowth that I use all the time to hide my bike.

Once I do that, I can jump from fallen log to fallen log through the marsh, and slog through some places where there aren't any logs, until I make it over to a place called

Government Island. The brush is so thick there that no one can see to the interior no matter how close they come in their boats on their way down Aquia Creek to the wide Potomac. I've been going to Government Island for years, mostly alone, where there's nobody but me and the squirrels and the raccoons and the otters and the ospreys and the herons, and I wish I could go back there now.

But I know I can't do it. I just can't. Not to Mom. Not to Lulu. Not to Dad. Not even to Carla.

So I make a U-turn in the middle of the highway, the tires squealing in protest, and ride back to juvie.

The first thing I see when I pull up is a woman who kind of looks like my mom standing outside the front door, eating an apple.

She watches me as I pull off my helmet. She watches me as I kick down the bike stand. I watch her, too – eating that apple slowly, like a cow chewing cud. She tilts her head to look into that cerulean sky and takes in a deep breath of the early-autumn air, too. Then she cocks her head in a way that makes me think she's listening to those blue jays, back at it again in the top of a nearby pine.

Finally she speaks. "You must be Sadie Windas."

"Yes, ma'am," I say.

"I'm Mrs. Simper." She has a strong southern accent. "The warden."

"Yes, ma'am."

She nods. "I suppose we'd best get you inside."

I don't move from my bike, though. I can't.

Mrs. Simper studies her apple core as if it holds the secret to the universe, or maybe just to make sure she's eaten all there is to eat. Then she tosses it in a trash can.

"Somebody coming to pick up that bike?"

"Yes, ma'am," I say again. "Key's under the seat."

"That a Kawasaki?" she asks.

"Yes, ma'am. Three-fifty cc."

"All righty, then," she says, and I realize she doesn't actually know anything about motorcycles. If I wasn't suspicious of Mrs. Simper before, I sure am now. Anyone trying as hard as her to be nice – you can't trust them. At all.

Mrs. Simper holds the door open and says, "After you, Sadie."

The last thing I hear, right up until the door bangs shut behind us, is those blue jays in that pine tree, going *Caw, caw, caw, caw, ca*—

CHAPTER 2

In which it's a few weeks earlier, Carla wants to party, and things fall apart

It was three weeks into September, a Saturday. I'd already gone to basketball practice for three hours in the morning and worked at the car wash all that afternoon. The tips had been lousy, my boyfriend, Kevin, was out of town, Mom was at one of her jobs, and now I was home playing with Lulu.

We started out sitting at the kitchen table, me tossing Cheerios at Lulu, trying to land them in her wide-open mouth. Most of them ended up on the floor, a few got tangled in her hair, and one hit her upper lip and stuck because she had a runny nose. That got Lulu laughing so hard, she fell out of her chair.

She grabbed her head, pretending to be hurt, which was this thing she did all the time so I would get her an ice pack out of the freezer. “Poor Lulu,” I said, playing my part. “Did you hurt your butt?”

“My *head!*” she yelled.

“Oh,” I said, shutting the freezer door. “So it *is* your butt.”

“No!” she yelled again. “*Not* my butt.”

I pulled her into my lap and handed her the ice pack. “Well, hold this on wherever it is so you don’t get a butt lump.”

“Not my butt!” she yelled, and then she stuck the ice pack down my shirt, which was what she always did as well. Only this time she somehow managed to slip it inside my sports bra.

I jumped up, dumping her out of my lap. Lulu rolled on the floor laughing, so once I extricated the ice pack, I grabbed her and stuck it down her pants.

That somehow led to her peeing herself, which led to us taking a bath together, which led to us playing with a family of tub ducks she’d had since she was a baby. They were supposed to turn blue on the bottom if the water was too hot. Or maybe they were supposed to turn blue on the bottom once the water was the right temperature. Either way, we just used them as battleships and made giant explosions that soaked the bathroom floor.

That’s what we were doing when Carla came in, reeking of Friendly’s.

“Hi, Mommy,” Lulu said.

“Hey, Carla,” I said.

She kissed Lulu on top of her wet head and then started in on me about this party she wanted to go to, and would I go with her?

“Please, Sadie?” she begged me. “We haven’t gone out in forever. Girls just gotta have fun, right?” Before I could say no, she coaxed Lulu into singing that song with her, Carla dancing right there in the soggy bathroom, still in her ice-cream-and-ketchup-stained waitress uniform, and Lulu standing up in the tub and dancing her naked little self along with her mom.

Carla pulled a dripping Lulu out of the tub, and they kept singing and dancing together while I slid down in the water and watched. For a minute it was like the old, sweet Carla was suddenly, magically back. I wondered how long that would last.

Carla brought up the party again after I climbed out and we got Lulu dried off and plopped her down in front of the TV. She pulled me into my bedroom and made me open my closet to look at clothes. “Come on, Sadie,” she said, holding up this stupid leopard-print blouse that Mom must have stuck in there. “I need you to go with me. Mom’ll only babysit Lulu if you agree to be my designated driver. I’ll even pay you. Look, here’s my tip money from this afternoon.”

Carla had been on probation for the past year, first

for pot possession and then, a couple of months later, for shoplifting. She'd stolen a pack of baby wipes, which was understandable, maybe even forgivable, except that she also stole an iPod Shuffle.

Maybe it was her dancing in the bathroom with Lulu. Maybe it was the way she seemed so excited for us to hang out. Maybe it was the fact that Kevin was out of town and I was bored. Whatever the reason, I finally caved. We told Mom we were going out with some people to dinner and a movie. She raised her eyebrows, but I kept my expression straight when she looked at me. Finally she settled back into the couch and told us to have a good time. "Don't be home too late," she said.

So a couple of hours later, past Lulu's bedtime and what should have been mine, we walked into an old run-down Victorian house near the river that looked like it ought to be condemned – weedy yard, slanting porch, missing shingles. It smelled of beer and sweat and pot and something totally out of place, like lavender. Everybody I saw was in their twenties or thirties, most already trashed. I was probably the only one there without a visible tattoo or piercing.

I let out a breath and tried to relax. The last time Carla dragged me to one of these parties, she ended up puking in her lap as I drove home, which was not only disgusting but totally freaked me out, since I'd only had my permit then and wasn't supposed to drive at night or without a sober adult riding shotgun. But that was a couple of years

ago, and I had a better sense of how to handle Carla now. Besides, we were driving her car tonight instead of Mom's; if she puked again, she'd have to clean it out herself.

Somebody handed me a cup of beer. I tried to say I didn't want it, but it was impossible to hear anything over the pounding bass. I turned to see if Carla wanted it, even though she usually drank harder stuff, but somehow she'd already slipped away into the raging circus of spinning mirror balls and girls dancing with girls and smoke as thick as ocean fog.

"Carla!" I called, though my voice was drowned out by all the people screaming at one another over the retro music. I fought my way through the crowd, my earlier optimism about the evening already gone. Of course Carla didn't want to hang out with me. All that joking about girls just wanting to have fun was really about *Carla* having fun and Sadie cleaning up the mess afterward.

I finally spotted her on the far side of the living room. Even in the crowd she was hard to miss in her bright-yellow Midas Muffler shirt that she bought at the thrift shop. I pushed my way to her side.

"Hey, Sadie!" she yelled as if we hadn't seen each other in forever. She grabbed my beer, said "Thanks," and drained it as she made her way to the kitchen. I followed her and told her to slow down, but she'd found the keg and was already pouring herself another. She handed me one, too.

“I don’t want this,” I said, or tried to. “I’m the designated driver —”

“Hey! Kendall!” she hollered right next to my ear at someone behind me. She elbowed her way across the kitchen to a girl who was leaning against the refrigerator, smoking a cigarette and looking bored. Kendall had a bright-red scar on her cheek and I couldn’t stop staring.

“This is Kendall!” Carla shouted. “She used to play something when we were in school. I can’t remember what. But she was an athlete. I remember that.”

“Cross-country,” Kendall said.

“Yeah,” Carla said. “I knew it was something like that. Anyway, Sadie’s a jock, too. So you guys can talk.”

She practically shoved us into each other and then started talking to a skuzzy guy who was working the keg.

I angled myself so I could keep an eye on her while I got to know all about Kendall the athlete.

“So you ran cross-country?”

Kendall nodded but didn’t say anything. She was already looking past me to see who else was around, smoking her cigarette hard, as if she was mad at it.

“I play basketball,” I said. “I’m on an AAU team. And I play at Mountain View.”

“What’s Mountain View?” Kendall asked dully.

“New high school. Just opened a couple of years ago. You went to Stafford with Carla, right?”

She grunted, which I guessed meant yes. She kept looking past me.

“Hey, check it out,” she said. “Carla already made a new friend.”

Carla and the scuzzy guy were leaning into each other near the keg. At first I thought they were making out, but then they shifted and I realized that the guy had a joint and was shotgunning a stream of smoke into Carla’s mouth. I should have gone over and tried to get her to stop – there was no such thing with Carla as just getting a *little* high – but I was already tired of playing nanny. At least we were still in the same room.

I turned back to Kendall and tried again to start a conversation.

“So where did you get the scar?” I asked, trying to sound flippant or breezy or something.

She touched the raw scar tissue absently. “I went to this party and started asking somebody I didn’t know a bunch of nosy-ass questions,” she said. “It was the wrong person to be asking.”

She pushed herself away from the refrigerator and dropped her cigarette on the linoleum floor, grinding it out under her shoe.

“I got to go see somebody,” she said, shoving past me.

“Great,” I said. “Whatever.”

Carla and Scuzzy had started working their way toward the living room, so I tried to follow them, but a crowd of more people suddenly pushed into the kitchen and made for the keg, pinning me against the counter. One girl stumbled in her heels and spilled her beer on my

sleeve. By the time I found a towel to dry it off, Carla was gone again.

I searched the entire house, including the bathrooms, which probably made me some enemies since I didn't bother waiting in line. I checked the driveway; at least the car was still there, though that didn't mean she hadn't left with Scuzzy. All I knew for sure was that I couldn't find her anywhere. I took a sip of beer and told myself to calm down. Carla might be self-centered and irresponsible, but she'd never leave a party with some guy she just met – at least not without telling me first.

I wandered onto the back porch, where a noisy game of beer pong was going on. It was as good a place as any to wait for Carla to show up. At least here the music wasn't deafening, and there was enough breeze to carry away some of the cigarette and pot smoke choking the rest of the house.

A decent-looking guy with blond dreads came over and asked if I wanted to be his beer-pong partner. I eyed the cup of beer I'd been carrying around for a while now and had hardly touched. I shrugged. Why not? I was a pretty good shot, even when I'd been drinking a little. I'd still be able to drive OK.

Dreadlocks, who might have been high, hugged me every time I nailed a cup – nothing creepy, just hugs – which was a lot since I was a good shot, like I said, and because I was easily the soberest person playing. Dreadlocks and I owned the table for a good hour.

Eventually, though, I started to worry too much about Carla and told Dreadlocks I had to go find her.

“I’ll go with you,” he said. “What’s she look like?”

I told him and we scanned the faces of the crowd as we pushed out way back into the living room, which was still jammed with people – freak dancing on one side of the room, slam dancing on the other. The music was some hard-core rap, bass shaking the walls, and I was already getting a headache.

Dreadlocks hooked an arm around my waist and tried to pull me over with the freak dancers.

“What are you doing?” I shouted.

“We should dance!” he shouted back, circling behind and trying to grind against me.

“Knock it off!” I yelled, twisting around. Then, for some reason, I added, “I have a boyfriend!”

“No problem,” Dreadlocks yelled back. “I have a girlfriend.”

I shoved him away, but the crowd pressed him right back. The next thing I knew, he was trying to kiss me.

I jerked my face away. “You have a girlfriend, remember?”

He blinked and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Did I say that?”

“Yeah,” I said, nodding too, in case he couldn’t hear me.

He shrugged. “It’s OK! She’s cool!”

I tried to slide away from him, but he kept his grip on my arm. “Ah, come on, Sally!”

“It’s Sadie!” I said. “Anyway, I have to find my sister.”

Eventually I made it through the scrum of dancers and into the hall. I was just about to go up and check all the rooms again when someone half stumbled down the stairs. Two people, actually: a scuzzy-looking guy holding up a very drunk girl. The girl was Carla.

“Hey,” she said with a wan smile, her yellow shirt half unbuttoned, no shoes, makeup smeared. She draped herself over me and I hugged her back, trying not to think about what she’d just been doing.

I buttoned up her shirt, wiped off her smeared lipstick, and combed my fingers through her hair to get it halfway decent. “Where are your shoes, Carla?” I shouted over the music.

She blinked at me, as if the concept of shoes was foreign to her, or as if she didn’t have shoes, had never had shoes. “Forget it!” I said. “I’m taking you home!”

To my surprise, she nodded. “OK. I’m ready.”

We nearly made it out of there. We got all the way to the front door. I was turning the knob, fishing in my pocket to double-check that I had the car keys, when Dreadlocks and Scuzzy appeared next to us in a cloud of pot smoke – a couple of stoner ghosts.

“You can’t be leaving yet,” Dreadlocks said.

“Hey, baby,” Scuzzy said to Carla. “We’re not done partying, are we?”

I was surprised to see Dreadlocks and Scuzzy together. “You guys know each other?” I asked.

Dreadlocks grinned. “Oh, hell yeah.” He didn’t elaborate.

I hung on to Carla. “We’re leaving,” I said.

Scuzzy laughed a cigarette laugh – as much smoke as words. “Hey, that’s OK. But Carla promised you girls would give us a ride first. Just over to the 7-Eleven to get some more beer for the party. You remember, baby, right?” he said to Carla. He shrugged a small backpack over his shoulder. “For beer.”

Carla nodded hazily. “For beer.”

I protested, but what Carla said, even if she was just stupidly repeating the words, gave the guys some sort of forward momentum. They ignored my protests and followed us out of the house and down the street to Carla’s car.

“Fine,” I said, my shoulder aching from propping Carla upright. “Just make it quick.”

Scuzzy tried to convince me to put Carla in the backseat with him. “Don’t you and him want to sit together?” he asked, nodding at Dreadlocks.

“No,” I said, trying to maneuver a limp Carla into the front seat. She was all deadweight.

“Me and her already hooked up,” Scuzzy said. “That counts for something, doesn’t it?”

“No,” I said, buckling Carla in. “My car, my rules. Boys in the back.”

Scuzzy got in and slammed the back door hard, to let me know he wasn’t happy. Dreadlocks at least was polite. He even opened and closed the driver’s-side door for me.

Carla slumped against the window. Dreadlocks lit a cigarette, but I made him put it out.

“Jesus,” Scuzzy muttered to him. “And you wanted to hook up with this ho?”

I clenched my teeth and sped toward the 7-Eleven. Carla hummed to herself, a song that sounded familiar but that I couldn’t quite make out, which pretty much summed up Carla these days: somebody who seemed familiar but who I couldn’t say I really knew.

There were empty spaces in front of the store, but Dreadlocks told me to park in a dark corner of the lot, out of the light. “It’s closer to the bathrooms,” he said. I didn’t want to argue and figured it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world if no one saw us driving around with these two losers – though it occurred to me that it was the sort of place somebody might park if they were planning on robbing a store.

And besides that – I realized too late, as I watched them disappear into the 7-Eleven – Dreadlocks would have to return the key to the bathroom, and so it didn’t save him any time if I parked here.

“Carla, I have a bad feeling about this,” I said, trying to keep my eyes on the guys inside the store, which was nearly impossible. Were they at the register? Were they asking for the bathroom key or for all the money in the register? “Carla?”

But Carla didn’t seem to hear me, or to care about anything that might be going on. Her head was leaned

back on the headrest, and her eyes were closed. She was still humming, only now I recognized the tune: an old Led Zeppelin song called “Going to California.” It made me think of Dad, who used to play Zeppelin all the time. And Pink Floyd and the Grateful Dead and all those guys.

I liked “Going to California” a lot – the acoustic guitar, the sweet lyrics about riding a white mare and trying to find a woman who’d never, ever been born, whatever that meant. Dad always played vinyl albums on an old record player when we were growing up. He said he never threw away a single album he ever owned, and I believed him. Once when I was little, I bought him a Led Zeppelin CD for Father’s Day, but he never listened to it. I hoped he still played his records now, alone in his wing of Granny’s old house, and I hoped they made him happy, at least a little.

The back door of the car opened suddenly. A bearded guy in a knit cap and a heavy gray overcoat slid into the backseat. He smiled an oily smile.

“What are you doing?” I demanded. Carla just looked back at the guy as if it was no big deal, happened all the time.

“You got something for me, right?” he said. “I got the call to meet a girl here.” He nodded at something in the backseat. It was a backpack that I only dimly recalled Scuzzy carrying. “That it?”

He handed me a thick envelope and I stupidly took it. It wasn’t until I held it up to the dim light from the store that I realized it was stuffed full of money.

“What is this?” I asked the guy in the knit cap, looking around for Scuzzy and Dreadlocks, hoping they would reappear and clear this whole thing up. “Nobody called you. I don’t want this—” I tried to give him back the envelope, but he ignored me.

He grabbed Scuzzy’s backpack off the floor and pulled out a freezer bag filled with pot. He sniffed it, tasted it for some reason, stuffed it back inside the pack, reached in his pockets, and pulled out a badge and a gun.

“Nice doing business with you, ladies,” he said, again with that oily smile. Other men with beards and knit caps and badges and overcoats and guns materialized out of the darkness and surrounded the car, which was suddenly flooded with the light from a dozen flashlights.

“And now you’re under arrest.”