

C H A P T E R

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Paul

NICK AND HENRY suffered those two months Elizabeth was away. They wouldn't say it to her, upbeat most of the time on their telephone calls, asking if the good guys—her clients were always the good guys—were winning the trial. "It's up and down," she'd tell them. "One day you're winning, the next day you're losing, and you can never be sure until the jury comes back with the verdict."

"It's all good days on the home front," we'd say. Then we'd hang up the phone and Nick would disappear into his room for a while. Henry usually crawled into my lap and laid his head on my shoulder.

Texas was hit by a drought that summer and the heat in Houston was unbearable by mid-June. I told the boys we could take off for Colorado whenever they were ready, but they didn't want to go without Elizabeth. Which was fine with me. I like the mountains, but I'm not inclined to hike or fish without Elizabeth, and the tourist scene in Estes Park gets old pretty quick—putt-putt golf and go-karts and crowds. At least in Houston I could keep Nick

and Henry occupied. They went swimming and played video games, stayed up late watching movies, slept until noon and spent the days with friends.

Elizabeth took charge the moment she arrived home, even though she was plainly exhausted. She cleaned out the end-of-school mess of notebooks, papers, and art supplies still strewn about the mudroom. She checked what progress had been made on the boys' required summer reading lists (none) and reestablished reasonable bedtimes. She took them to the dentist and for their annual physicals, all appointments she'd made before leaving for Alaska, went through the information packets we'd gotten for the coming school year, and bought uniforms for the fall. She was a woman possessed, getting her family back to normal.

I found that attractive about her when we were younger—her confidence and determination, her sheer physical and mental strength. Now, sometimes, I hate her for it.

Like the fucking hike to Sky Pond.

It was a lot to expect from all of us, but especially from Henry. He's like his mother, a ferocious kid, but still, he'd just turned six. The hike up took longer than we expected, we were wiped out when we got to the top and stayed longer than we should have, risking the afternoon rains that park visitors are advised to avoid. I considered that possibility before we left, suggested we find an alternative, but Elizabeth wouldn't hear of it. She'd grown up hiking, camping overnight in the backcountry, had climbed Longs Peak God knows how many times. I supposed she'd spring that on us next.

When the rain hit that afternoon, I realized that only ten days into it, I was ready for the vacation to end. The backs of my legs were sunburned, my feet hurt like hell, and now I was freezing. The cabin was comfortable and large, a house, really, after all the work we'd done on it, but at Elizabeth's insistence there was no television or internet, and I wasn't looking forward to another game of Monopoly or Hearts. I couldn't wait for my classes to start.

Taking a year off to write had been good for me, although with family responsibilities and Elizabeth's trial schedule, I hadn't gotten as much work done as I'd hoped. Her schedule always took priority, and if she couldn't cover an appointment or make it to a basketball or soccer game, that was my job. I showed her a few of the poems I'd written most recently, and she said they were beautiful and insightful, but I wasn't convinced she liked them or even understood them. Elizabeth is a voracious reader when she has the time, but I've never seen her browse through or even pick up one of the hundred or so books of poetry I've collected over the years. I was anxious to meet my fellow graduate students, be part of a community that understands the value of art and writing and knows the amount of work and discipline required to create it.

We reached the end of the trail, and I veered off to the privy. There was no one around and I thought about just pissing on the side of the parking lot, but I'd catch hell from Elizabeth if she saw me. I stepped inside to the dark and the smell, unzipped and let go with a sigh of relief.

My hands were cold, my hair soaked under my baseball cap. Water dripped from my jacket down my shins, joined the puddle of mud and whatever else I was standing in. I decided then and there that I would go back to Houston. Elizabeth could stay in Colorado with the boys, and I would have some time to myself before school began. She'd be okay with that—we'd given each other space before—and she could hardly argue after having been gone for two months. But she was tired after the hike. I'd raise the subject in the morning, after breakfast and a good night's sleep.

I finished, pushed open the privy door and slammed it shut, crossed the parking lot to the Jeep. Elizabeth rolled down the window. She was in the driver's seat. Nick was in the back. Henry was nowhere to be found.