

Oliver Loving

ALSO BY STEFAN MERRILL BLOCK

The Story of Forgetting

The Storm at the Door

Oliver Loving

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Stefan Merrill Block



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*For Liese: beneath every word,
the subatomic vibration*

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Oliver

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CHAPTER ONE

Your name is Oliver Loving. Or not Oliver Loving at all, some will say. Just a fantasy, a tall tale. But perhaps those labels are fitting; maybe you were born to become nothing more than a myth. Why else would your granny have insisted your parents name you after your state's legendary cattleman, to whom your family had only an imaginary genealogical linkage? Like yours, your namesake's story was a rough and epic one. The original Oliver Loving, and his vast cattle empire, came to an end when the man was just fifty-four, shot by the Comanche people somewhere in the jagged terrain of New Mexico. "Bury me in Texas," your namesake begged his trail partner, Charles Goodnight, whose name your granny later bestowed upon your brother. And so you might be forgiven for thinking that your future was foretold in the beginning. Just as the violence of your namesake's time turned the first Oliver Loving into a folk hero, so did the violence of your own time turn you from a boy into a different sort of legend.

A boy and also a legend: you were seventeen years old when a .22 caliber bullet split you in two. In one world, the one over your hospital bed, you became the Martyr of Bliss, Texas. Locked in that bed, you lost your true dimensions, rose like vapor, a disembodied idea in the hazy blue sky over the Big Bend Country. You became the hope-

ful or desperate or consoling ghost who hovered over the vanishing populace of your gutted hometown, a story that people told to serve their own ends. Your name has appeared on the home-made signs pumped by angry picketers on the redbrick steps of your old schoolhouse, in many heated opinion pieces in the local newspapers, on a memorial billboard off Route 10. By your twentieth birthday, you had become a dimming hive of neurological data, a mute oracle, an obsession, a regret, a prayer, a vegetative patient in Bed Four at Crockett State Assisted Care Facility, the last hope your mother lived inside.

And yet, in another universe, the one beneath your skin, you remained the other Oliver, the one few people cared to know *before*, just a spindly kid, clumsy footed and abashed. A straight-A student, nervous with girls, speckled with acne, gifted with the nice bone structure you inherited: your father's pronounced jaw, your mother's high cheekbones. You were a boy who often employed the well-used adolescent escape pods from solitude, through the starships and time machines of science fiction. You were also a reverential son, eager to please, and you tried to be a good brother, even if you sometimes let yourself luxuriate in the fact that your mother clearly preferred you. In truth, you needed whatever victories you could win. You were just seventeen; after that night, only your family could remember that boy clearly. But yours was a family that remembered so often and well that it could seem—if only for a minute, here and there—as if the immense, time-bending gravity of their remembering could punch a hole in the ether that spread between you, as if your memories might become their own.

“According to science,” your father spoke to the stars on that night when your story began, “our universe is only one of many. Infinite universes. Somewhere there is a universe that takes place in a single frozen second. A universe where time moves backward. A universe that is nothing but the inside of your own head.”

At seventeen, you took this bit of soft astrophysics in the way you took all your father's lectures: less than seriously. Your father, an after-hours painter and teacher of art classes at Bliss Township School, had founded the school's Young Astronomers Club and more or less forced your brother and you to serve as its president and vice president. But the truth was that you shared with Pa just an artist's dreamy interest in astronomy. The constellations were mostly twinkling metaphors to you both. But that night, in his Merlot-warmed way, your father was prophetic. Your own journey into another universe, the universe where your family lost you, began very subtly. It began, appropriately enough, with the minute movements of your left hand.

Your hand. That night it was like an autonomous being whose behavior you couldn't predict. For a half hour or more, it had just lain there, but now you watched in silent astonishment as your fingers marshaled their courage, began a slow march across the woolen material of the Navajo blanket on which you were lying on a reedy hilltop on your family's ancient ranch, a two-hundred-acre patch of Chihuahuan Desert that an optimistic forbear of yours named Zion's Pastures. Your eyes hardly registered the blazing contrails and sparkles of celestial brilliance in the sky, the Perseid meteor shower falling over West Texas. Your whole awareness was focused upon your fingers, which were more interested in a different, localized phenomenon: Rebekkah Sterling on a blanket just inches from your own. You breathed deeply, her vanilla smell cutting through the land's head-shop aroma of sun-cooked creosote.

"Huh," Rebekkah Sterling said. "That is fascinating."

"You think *that's* fascinating." Your father then proceeded to hold forth on one of his favorite astronomical lectures, about how the basic atomic building blocks for life, everything that makes us us, was produced in the fiery engine of distant stars. But you did not need your father's lecture on the epochs of evolution. Your hand offered a better, in vivo demonstration of life's perseverance despite the bad odds. Your hand, like an amphibious creature clambering out of

the primordial ocean, now began its journey over the five inches of hard earth and dead grama grass that separated Rebekkah Sterling's blanket from yours.

Rebekkah Sterling! For the year since her family had moved to town, you had been tracking her closely. Well, you tracked many girls closely in the slumped silence of your school days, but what was it about Rebekkah that set her apart? She was a very slight girl; the outline of her bones pressed against her tight skin. It was true what you would later write about her in a poem, her hair really *did* look like a *piled fortune of amber ringlets*. But she carried that hair like some burdensome heirloom her mother obliged her to wear, something that faintly embarrassed her. She'd tuck that *fortune* into barrettes and scrunchies, pull and chew at its ends. She seemed to spend the durations of your literature class together practicing how to make the least sound possible. When she had to sneeze, she'd first bury her head in her sweater. It was the peculiar sadness of her silence that you found so beautiful. But if not for your father's astonishing pronouncement at dinner one Monday night, your Rebekkah Sterling story would likely have ended the way all your girl stories ended, in your own, far less beautiful brand of silence.

Over the last years, the cumulative effects of disappointment, time, and the considerable quantities of the cheap whiskey Pa consumed had eroded most of your family's old traditions, but you still maintained a Monday night ritual, Good Things Monday, when each Loving, before supper, had to name one good thing to look forward to in the week to come. That night, as the burnt molasses of Ma's meat loaf had wafted from the gray slab set before you, you mustered something perfunctory about a novel, *Ender's Game*, which you were liking; Ma spoke of a slight alleviation of her back pain; Charlie's Good Thing was many good things, three separate parties to which he had been invited that weekend. But the only truly Good

Thing you heard that night, the first certifiable Good Thing you had heard in a very long while, was your father's news.

"Looks like we'll have a visitor," Pa said.

The permanent roster of the Young Astronomers counted no member who did not share the last name Loving, but over the years, Pa had occasionally been able to cajole one of his pupils to attend a meeting. And when your father that night informed his family that he had convinced a former student of his named Rebekkah Sterling to come to Zion's Pastures to watch the meteors, you grasped your seat.

"Rebekkah Sterling?"

"That's what I said." Pa grinned. "Why? That name mean something special to you?"

"No. Or I guess *something*. We have English together."

Before that day you had never exchanged more than a word or two in Mrs. Schumacher's Honors Literature class. You were certain she wouldn't actually follow through on your father's invitation.

Days passed, and you tried to forget that unlikeliest possibility, tried to resign yourself to the glumness of your town in that late summer. That August represented something of a crisis point in Presidio County, but it was a crisis that had been roiling for years—generations, in fact. The border between the English-speaking north and the Spanish-speaking south might have been settled a century and a half before, but it was never an entirely peaceful distinction out in your slice of the borderland. On the white side of that divide, you'd grown up under your late grandmother's alternative Texas history, "the true story of this country they'd never teach in those schoolbooks of yours," a place where for 150 years immigrants had been building the towns and doing the menial tasks, the enduring threat of deportation used to enforce a sort of soft slavery. Granny Nunu had told you how, as recently as her own childhood, your school had conducted a mock burial for "Mr. Spanish," a ceremony in which the Latino students were made to write Spanish words on slips of paper, drop them into a hole in the earth, and bury them. "Shameful,

shameful business, behind us now, thank the Lord, but you can't ever forget it," Granny Nunu told you.

But in your own childhood, these old divides hadn't seemed quite so dire. Spanish was now a required course for all students; in your grade-school days, white and Latino children were often invited to the same birthday parties. And yet, in recent years, as the cartels seized vast powers in Mexico, the white population had been fretting, with growing panic, over the stories of narcotic warfare coming from only a few miles away. Down the river, at the border town of Brownsville, police had recently found body parts of a number of Honduran immigrants scattered across the highway. Up in Presidio, local ranchers were reporting bands of cartel soldiers crossing their properties by night. Immigration had leapt to numbers unknown for generations. And as all these addled refugees came over the river, they arrived to a county blighted by lack of commerce. Ranching and mineral mining had long ago gone bust in your hometown. The only real industries left in the county were sluggish tourism, out in the state and national parks; border control enforcement; and the few local businesses that the employees of these federally funded enterprises could support. The last thing that hardscrabble Blissians wanted was a multitude of new workers, willing to toil for less-than-legal wages.

Something had to be done, was the white opinion, and so it had been a summer of a great many deportations, whole families carted from Bliss to the other side of the Rio Grande. For the TV cameras, the West Texas Minutemen—one of those jingoistic militias that patrolled the desert for surreptitious immigrants—were doing frequent demonstrations at the river, shooting their rifles into the Mexican sky.

Though this fraught border between nations lay thirty miles to the south of Bliss, another border ran down the center of your schoolhouse. Just as the towns all over your county were split in two, neighborhoods segregated by language and skin tone, you'd come to see that Bliss Township School was truthfully two schools; the honors classes were almost entirely white, the "regular" classes mostly Latino. All of the school's officially sanctioned activities—

dances, football games, academic clubs—were white, and the Latino activities were mostly ones that the school officials tried to disperse: the Tejanos' daily gatherings out front, right on the schoolhouse steps, where they blasted music from their cars, causing a minor, perpetual commotion.

It was out there, just beyond the school gates, that something of a brawl had broken out the first week of school, when Scotty Coltrane and his pale cronies began barking abuse at the grounds crew. "*Andale, andale!*" Scotty was yelling at a lawn-mowing man when a Mexican kid crept up from behind and bloodied Scotty's nose. Under ordinary circumstances, it might have ended there, the boys called before Principal Dixon, a suspension issued, but in that tense August the fight turned into a brawl, a dozen boys piling on.

But even in this divided school, you felt yourself to be in a further subdivision all your own, a boy who wanted only to pass his days unnoticed. It was shaping up to be another lonesome year, the worst yet, until that actual miracle happened.

You had been in your father's art classroom, after school that Thursday, marking up your biology homework as Pa worked paint thinner into the student tables. Your brother was sketching something at an easel—a ballerina in a tutu, screaming as two lions devoured her legs—when he turned his head to an arrival at the door. Rebekkah Sterling stepped timidly into the room.

"Rebekkah," you said, feeling ashamed to speak her name to her face.

"So!" Rebekkah said. "Today I get to see where Oliver Loving lives."

Through a blooming blush, you watched her closely, something in her wry grin suggesting her attendance at the meteor shower must have been some kind of a joke. Or, more likely, she had only accepted your father's invitation to be kind.

But then a wondrous thing happened when Pa drove you home. "Shotgun!" Charlie yelled in the parking lot, and climbed into the front seat. And as one of the backseats was piled with Pa's collection

of paper coffee cups and fast food refuse, Rebekkah and you had to sit right next to each other, your denim-clad thighs touching snugly, your leg registering each jostle with ecstatic friction.

“A couple hours till nightfall yet,” Pa said when you arrived at Zion’s Pastures. “Why don’t you take Rebekkah for a little show-around, and we’ll get the picnic ready?” He winked at you, not very subtly.

Most of the land of Zion’s Pastures was just parched country, like photographs you’d seen of the islands of Greece, if someone had vacuumed away the Aegean. But you wanted to show Rebekkah your land’s rare swatch of lushness, guiding her down to the fertile earth along Loving Creek. As you led Rebekkah through the machete-cut trails, your anxiety turned you into some kind of historian. “My great-great-grandfather and his family came from Wales, that’s near England, and they had this crazy idea that Texas wouldn’t be so different from Wales but with enough land for everyone—” You begged your mouth to silence, but it refused to quit its lectures. “This is called a century plant. Its stem supposedly shoots just once in a hundred years.” You awkwardly added, “To reproduce.” Rebekkah silently trailed your elbow. You elected for the most arduous paths, where many times you had to lift a branch for her to duck the tunnel of your arm. At last you came to your destination, the little creekside cave where you spent many evenings and weekends, doing your homework and writing your rhymy poems at the old poker table you had taken from the storage shed.

“Here it is,” you said. “My secret lair.”

“Secret lair? What are you, Superman?”

“That’s the Fortress of Solitude.”

“So no solitude for you, huh?” she asked. “You bring a lot of people here? It’s very cool.”

“You’re the first. The first non-Loving, I mean.”

“I’m honored.”

“You should be. It’s very exclusive.”

Rebekkah emitted a faint “ha” and looked up to observe the fleshy knobs of the mini-stalactites that hung from the ceiling.

There had been a time when your boyish imagination could make this pocket of rock seem deep with mystery, a potential burial place for the sort of lost Mexican treasure that your late granny liked to tell stories about. Now it looked to you only like a dim hollow, shallow and gray.

“Oh my God!” Rebekkah shouted, doing a frantic little skip. “A snake!”

You laughed, more loudly than you intended. “That’s just snake-skin. Some rattler must have molted here.” You both knelt to examine the diaphanous material, the translucent scales making miniature rainbows in the early evening light.

“Wow. It’s sort of beautiful,” Rebekkah said.

You poked at the iridescent rattler sheath, and the frail substance crumbled under your fingertip. Rebekkah put a hand to her face. “You ruined it,” she said.

“Sorry.”

“Why did you do that?”

“It’s no big deal. Snakeskin is everywhere around here. Really. We can find some more, if you want.”

Rebekkah stood away, made a frustrated little snort. You couldn’t quite understand what you’d done wrong, but you did understand that you were already failing your first conversation with her.

“Listen,” you said. “You really don’t have to stay all the way to tonight if you don’t want. My pa could drive you home.”

“Your *pa*. So Texan.”

You shrugged. “Ma and Pa. That’s just what we’ve always called them. I guess it was my grandmother’s doing. Always made us do things the old-fashioned way.”

“Anyway,” Rebekkah said, “thanks for the advice. But when I want to go, you’ll be the first to know.”

“It’s just that I know it’s kind of weird that you’re here. And now you’re looking like you are feeling weird.”

“Weird is how I’m looking?”

“I didn’t mean—maybe not.”

"If anything," she said, "all this is just making me a little jealous. This place. Your family. You get to live like this every day."

But you were the jealous one just then, jealous of other boys better suited for a girl like Rebekkah, with her sad, thousand-yard stare. "My dad drinks alone in his shed most nights," you told her, trying to match your tone to hers, that whispery subdued register. "My mother looks at me like I'm three years old."

Rebekkah glanced up at you, smiled sadly. "Well, I guess we have a few things in common, then." And then Rebekkah reached for you and mussed your hair like a child's. Like a child's, maybe, but on the hike back to the house, your legs throwing long shadows, you could still feel the warmth of her hand on your head, a kind of imaginary crown.

"And have you heard about how scientists have been measuring the universe?" Pa asked, two hours later, on that hilltop. The remnants of the picnic your mother had packed were strewn about. In honor of the guest, Pa had limited himself to wine, the emptied bottle of Merlot now tipped on its side. "They've found this way to take the whole thing's weight. They can weigh the universe now! Incredible!"

"Incredible," you said, but you had much more interesting measurements in mind. Your fingertips had at last forged the great divide, and they fell with exhaustion on the polyester shore of Rebekkah's blanket. You must have been less than six inches from her now; you felt the warmth that her skin radiated. Your fingers took the land's measure, stood, and began the final march. A sudden streak of brightness cut the deep purple above. "Oh! Look look look!" Charlie shouted.

"So, Rebekkah, tell us about you," your mother said, her voice at the edge of that tone she used with strangers, the one she called *skeptical* and your brother called *mean*. "You're new here, right?"

"We've been here for a little more than a year now. My father works for an oil company. Fracking. Never in one place long."

“Poor girl,” Ma said. “I know how that goes. We moved around so much when I was a kid, I’d gone to eight schools before I was fifteen.”

“It’s hard,” Rebekkah said.

“I have to admit,” Pa said, “I saw a little thing about your father in the paper, something about the surveys his company’s been doing around Alpine. Fingers crossed they strike it rich, Lord knows we could use the business.”

Rebekkah shrugged. “He never tells me much about it,” she said. “Just lets me know when it’s time to move again.”

“Our family has lived here for about a million years!” Charlie piped. “We never go anywhere! It’s not always such a picnic, let me tell you.”

“Charlie.”

“Sorry.” Charlie giggled.

Even setting aside the miraculous identity of your guest, it was very strange to witness your family perform itself for an outsider. You couldn’t remember the last time a visitor had come to Zion’s Pastures. A couple of years before, your mother had cured the grandfather clock of its mildew infestation by setting it for two days in the front yard. “Just needs a little sunlight to heal,” she had explained. A seventeen-year-old boy, unkissed, could be forgiven for already beginning to conceive of Rebekkah like that healing sun upon his whole lonesome, mildewed life at Zion’s Pastures.

“So how you liking it?” Pa said. “School going okay so far this year?”

“It’s good. I sure miss your art class.” You noticed that as she spoke she gestured with her left hand, but kept the other lying there, unbudging in the darkness.

“You know,” Rebekkah said. “All this star talk is reminding me of that song. *They call me on and on across the universe—*”

All four of you tuneless Lovings lay there, stunned, as Rebekkah sang a line of that Beatles tune.

“Crikey,” Charlie said.

“Beautiful.” Pa whistled. “Got some serious pipes on you, good Lord.”

“I don’t know about that,” Rebekkah said. “I just like to sing sometimes.”

After a time, Pa resumed his astronomy lesson. “Of course you know that *falling stars* is not really accurate. What you are looking at are just minor asteroids burning up in the atmosphere, but it is remarkable . . .” You were no longer listening. Because your hand understood that it didn’t have forever. And so, in one brave and reckless act, your hand called upon the support of wrist and forearm. It crouched low, and then it sprang. And there would perhaps never be a joy as acute as the joy of Rebekkah’s downy, warm-soft fingers when they did not stray from the point of contact. Your hands remained there, for whole seconds, their backsides pressed together, turning red hot, generating the atomic material of the future. But your hand was no fool. It understood that the snakeskin had been a kind of sign; if you lingered too long, the delicate thing would crumble.

A half-hour later, you were all sauntering back up the dirt road, the weak flicker of your cheap flashlights casting skittish halos over dust and cacti. “Goodness. It’s already nine thirty,” Ma told Rebekkah. “Probably close to your curfew, no?”

“Huh,” she said. “I guess.”

“Well, then, we’d best get you home.”

“We’d best,” Rebekkah said, and Ma nodded, walking ahead to set a swifter pace. For just a second, you turned to look at Rebekkah. The moon was rising now, and you watched as the thinness of her lips bent into a smile. You smiled in reply. But you were a boy who had developed a nearly anaphylactic aversion to prolonged eye contact, and you looked away, gaped up awkwardly at the sky: a poor decision. Before you could understand what had happened, the intense penny smell of blood had already filled your nose. Your boot toe had caught a rock, sent you sprawling on the path.

“Woot!” your brother hollered. “There he goes again!”

“Oliver!” Ma yelled. “Your nose!”

"It's fine," you said.
 "It's not. It's *bleeding*."
 "It's nothing."
 "Nothing? Why are you *smiling*?"
 "I don't know."

As you sat up, you watched your brother hopping from foot to foot, doing what he did with your frequent teenage-klutzy tumbles, turning it into some slapstick act for his entertainment. "I can't believe it! Your best spill yet! Gold medal! Classic!"

"Oh my God," Rebekkah murmured.

"Keep it pinched," your mother said. "Here, use one of the napkins. You need to lie down! Stay here and we'll come pick you up with the car. Or, wait, Jed, what about the couch in your studio?"

"My studio?" Pa said, and paused. "Right. I guess come on then."

The shame of this scene was not inconsiderable, but it was little next to the astonishment you now had to stifle. You were going to Pa's studio? Your father's so-called art studio was a tumbledown cabin, a half mile up the dirt road from the big house, and it was strictly off-limits to his family. And in the past few months, Pa himself often seemed off-limits, too. He occasionally dragged his body to the dinner table, but always his mind remained out there, latched behind a cabin door, in a hazy cloud of Pall Mall smoke and whiskey vapors. This latest absence was longer than his previous ones, but throughout your childhood Pa had disappeared to his painting shed most weekends. Like a controlled experiment to refute the old Texan belief in the direct relationship between perseverance and reward, Pa's countless painting hours had never summed to anything very successful. He spurned the locally ubiquitous landscape art—those shattered canyons and Comanche dragoons in hot pursuit of their bison—that might have fetched him real money in favor of his "true work," which amounted to artful knockoffs of a number of dead masters who piled the bright paint thickly. Van Gogh, Kandinsky, Munch, Chagall.

In his whole stymied, self-poisoning career, you had seen your father sell just a single painting. This was at the start of your freshman year,

when Bliss Township threw its fund-raising jamboree on the school's front lawn. Amid booths jammed with foil-wrapped brownies, tin-plated pies, and clunky granny needlepoints, Pa set up a stand to sell his students' work. Of course, nearly all those bleeding watercolors and fingerprint-smudged charcoals sold at asking price—to the artists' own parents. But, late into that Saturday afternoon, a single piece remained unsold. The same oil painting Pa had unveiled at your last Good Things Monday, his wind-whirled rendition of Bliss Township School, the mass of children out front just a bright yellow suggestion, the schoolhouse's cupolas and cornices warping into the shapes of the jolly clouds above. For his own asking price, Pa had affixed a blue sticker that said, \$250.

As the pies vanished from the booths, as the Bliss Township Marching Band began to fold away their gear, Pa's painting still languished there, unpurchased. Your brother tugged at Ma and you to huddle with him behind the art booth. "We have to buy his painting," Charlie said. "We have to!" Ma touched his cheek. "You are the sweetest boy in the world," she told him. Not to be bested, you felt your pockets for your saved allowance, showing Ma twenty-four dollars. Charlie could contribute only six, and your mother had just eighty-five dollars in her pocketbook. She clutched the gathered money in her fist, worked a finger into one of her curls. "Wait here," she said, and when she came back, five minutes later, she was smiling so widely you could see her back fillings.

"Just watch." She pointed in the direction of your father, whom your school principal, Doyle Dixon, was approaching with an outstretched palm. Principal Dixon showed Pa a stack of crumpled money, and you watched your father fight back a lunging impulse to hug the man. Instead, he pocketed the cash, nodded, and presented the painting to his boss.

"Now listen," Ma said. "Doyle put in the rest himself, and I made him promise he'd never mention our own little contribution. Do you promise you won't say a thing?"

“You—” Charlie was saying, but by that point Pa had practically skipped his way through the crowd.

“Doyle bought the damn thing,” Pa said. “Told me he’s going to hang it at school. Guess it wasn’t the wreck I was fretting, huh?”

“What have I been telling you?” Ma said, working her grin into submission. “It’s a beauty.”

The sale of this painting, however, had done little for his confidence. “Going through labor,” Pa liked to call his long studio sessions, but as for the results of all those painful gestations? He tossed most of his canvases onto the frequent bonfires he’d make in the fire pit. “Have you heard of installation art?” Pa liked to quip. “Well, I make *incineration* art.” It had been a very long time since you had seen his work.

But now you were going to Pa’s studio—with Rebekkah Sterling! In huaraches, your father walked on ahead into the desert night, leading the way for a grim, dirgelike march, the hard grind of stones under your feet, bats calling invisibly through the air. You let your family lead you, like a blind man, the blood in your nose beginning to congeal.

At the cabin, you settled yourself on the stain-spangled divan in the darkness, and Pa lit two camphor lanterns. Though you felt the blood pooling back into your nostrils you couldn’t bear to keep your head tilted away from this rare view. Arranged among the stub-choked ashtrays and empty bottles of George Dickel whiskey, his latest paintings, you were sorry to see, were an immediate disappointment. To your eyes, they just looked like a continuation of his artistic thievery.

Rebekkah, however, walked right up to these canvases and paused, as if she had some silent greeting to make to each one. Pa pushed the blunt end of a paintbrush against his lip as he nervously observed her. “They are a little crude,” he at last said. “I know it. I’m having some trouble with my brushes, and I think—”

“No.” Rebekkah spoke to the thickly slathered cerulean sky a few inches from her face. “They are beautiful.”

“Think so?” Pa watched the back of Rebekkah’s head nod slowly.

“Is that *us*?” Charlie asked. Your brother had noticed something you had not. Near the edge of each frame—beneath the swirling paisleys of a van Goghian starscape, at the periphery of a throbbing field of expressionist colors, amid the animalistic swipes and slashes of abstract brushwork—were four unmistakable figures: your parents, your brother, and you.

“It’s a series,” he said. “Or that’s how I think of them. Actually, it’s based on what I was telling you earlier, about the multiverse. If that’s true about the other universes, then somewhere there must be a whole universe that takes place inside of Vincent van Gogh paintings, right? Another inside of Munch. Kandinsky. And then I thought, what would it be like to live in those other places?”

At the time, you took this cosmological explanation for more of his knockoff canvases as fanciful, sentimental, a little drunken. The whole concept reminded you of the stories that your brother and you, as younger boys, had liked to tell each other about secret passageways, portals to hidden worlds buried in the land, fantasies that you had both outgrown. These paintings embarrassed you a little, on your father’s behalf. In this so-called series of paintings, you saw that Pa had married his life’s two great failures: the confines of his thwarted artistic imagination and his increasingly silent relationship with his family here on this planet. It seemed a little pathetic, Pa’s painting these other universes for his family members when the simpler solution would be just to have actual conversations with you.

“But if there are all these other universes, where are they?” Your brother was always the more credulous, cheery son, untroubled by dark implications. “How do you get there?”

“Don’t know,” Pa slurred in a grave register, as if this were a question that had been troubling him. “Maybe a black hole.”

“A black hole?” Charlie asked. “I thought it was all just dark in black holes.”

“No one knows for sure. Could be blackness or could be that it’s a wormhole. To another universe. The thing about black holes, I read

this, is that the science of them is unknowable. To get close enough for a good look, the gravity in there would tear you apart.”

Less than three months later a black hole would open in West Texas, and you would come to see that there was something to your father’s naive cosmology after all. His theory held true of the black hole that would dissolve the floor beneath your feet on the night of November fifteenth: you would only begin to understand the truth—about Rebekkah, your own part in that night’s horrors—just as you lost the ability to describe it. A terrible brightness would break through you. What would make it so terrifying is that it wouldn’t hurt at all.

A beam of light trembled over the thick oils of Pa’s impressionist multiverse, a flashlight shaking in his alcoholic hands. “Anyway,” you told Pa, “Rebekkah is right. They are very pretty.”

And as he grinned, you were grinning, too. Maybe, you were thinking, you didn’t need to perform your unhappiness for Rebekkah, maybe she didn’t want your own sad stories. Maybe it was the possibility of witnessing a better family that had brought her to you? Tomorrow, you had just decided, you would at last spill the secret of Pa’s schoolhouse painting. Despite whatever disappointment you knew looking at his latest output, you were very glad for the promise of this story to tell her, how the three of you had huddled there behind a carnival booth, pooling what little you had to write that day a happier ending for your father.

Oh, of course it would be easy to pity that kid you were then, just a boy feeling the miracle of a freshly touched hand, practicing how to tell his best example of what made his family a family. A boy doomed to a future he could never have guessed. And yet maybe somehow, that night, you were already beginning to rehearse your part in this story? Soon the black hole would open, you would fall to one side, and your family would remain on the other. And after reading all those childhood epics—all those sci-fi, fantasy, survivalist, and tall tales that you so loved, and after all Pa’s talk of parallel universes, too—how not to believe that somehow your own otherworldly bed-bound epic

really was foretold? How else to explain that unlikeliest sorrow you and your family were made to endure, the mythological transformations you were made to undergo? How not to believe, even still, that you were *chosen*?

No, you wouldn't be able to pity yourself for long. You might have fallen through a black hole, but your family's fate was equally desperate. They had to stay behind, on Planet Earth.

Eve

.....

CHAPTER TWO

It was that lost, oblivious minute that haunted Eve Loving most. What had she been doing at precisely 9:13 on the night of November fifteenth? Eve wouldn't ever be able to remember, not exactly, of course. Just laundry, most likely. Reaching into the creaking, complaining machine, hefting the clumped, sodden wreckage of a week of dirtied clothes, pitching it into the open mouth of the dryer. She would later retain a faint memory of seeing a pair of her husband's fraying BVDs dropped to the dusty crevice between the machines, of stooping to chuck it into the dryer. *Rotating* was her family's name for this chore.

Eve would remember doing a lot of rotating that night, the last night her universe was still intact. As the old dryer made its monstrous noises, Eve rotated from living room to kitchen, kitchen to porch, porch to bedroom, needing to busy herself. Her father-in-law had died decades before Eve met Jed; her mother-in-law, Nelly "Nunu" Loving, had passed away years ago, but this was still Nunu's house, a granny house, porcelain figurines in the china cabinets, sunny desertscapes in gilt frames, a leering grandfather clock grunting off the seconds. She was alone in the house at Zion's Pastures. Charlie was off at the Alpine Cinemas (*Death Machine Robot 7*, or some ridiculous thing), Jed chaperoning the Bliss Township Homecoming

Dance, Oliver a poor, dateless attendee, who had inexplicably decided, at the last possible minute, to don one of his father's seldom-worn suits and set off to the dance on his own. A fact to haunt Eve for the rest of her life: she had driven Oliver to the school herself.

The night before, Jed had done a highly uncommon thing (was this significant? she would later wonder); when he had come back from his work in the shed, he had slid up next to Eve in the sheets. Over the years, Eve had learned the variety of moods Jed's drinking brought forth. There was the Mope, the Discontent, the Manic, but last night he had scooted up to Eve as that rarest of his species, the Affectionate.

"It's too hot to sleep like that," Eve had told him, shimmying away.

"Who said anything about sleep?"

"Are you serious?"

"Why not? Don't you think it's time the prisoner deserves a conjugal visit?"

"Prisoner? And so in this metaphor I'm the jailer?"

"Eve."

"What?"

"Nothing."

For whole minutes, they had both just lain there, in the humid silence of the bedroom.

"The dance is tomorrow," Jed said at last.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. And I don't think our poor son has managed to wrangle a date."

"I know. But I don't think it's such a tragedy. I never went to any dances myself, when I was his age."

"I think you should come with me to chaperone," Jed said. "Maybe we could convince Oliver to come, Charlie, too. I think we'd all have a good time."

"You are asking me to homecoming."

“Would you do me the honor?”

“Jed,” she said, “I’m sorry, but those school parties give me the creeps. Bad memories, I guess.”

In her peripatetic youth, Eve had spent her childhood as the New Girl, the perpetual out-of-towner, the vaguely ethnic-looking intruder in classes filled with plain, pale faces. The story of Eve’s childhood had been the tragedy of chronic self-reinvention. Each time she had taken her new seat in the front row of a classroom, she faced new eyes tracking her, waiting for her to reveal herself. And even after twenty years in West Texas, Eve still felt the outcast among its white, Christian-cheery people, the wives and husbands of Jed’s fellow Bliss Township faculty making her feel like some foreign interloper, some suspect Jewess, some Other slotted in the nebulous racial space between white and Latina. It wasn’t a persona she had at last developed so much as a defense strategy. She had learned to behave like a wallflower until approached, at which point she behaved like a Venus flytrap.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Jed said, his body going rigid.

(Might her whole future have pivoted on that late-night rejection? If she had only let his whiskey-loosened body overtake her, for the first time in nearly a year, might she actually have let him persuade her to go to the dance? Might her presence there have somehow changed everything?)

“Jed, listen,” she said after a time, but he had already fallen asleep.

The next night, 9:15 passed to 9:16. Did she feel her own Big Bang gathering its hot charge, time and space beginning to warp? Hideously, no. Eve was only puttering about the reliquary of a family that seemed, in her solitary night, already vanished. Oliver’s adventure and sci-fi books on the bedroom shelf, her boys’ shirts hanging neatly in the tight little closet, the shellacked longhorn bones shining on the walls. Oliver would be off to college in less than two years, Charlie in four, and she was already indulging the empty nester’s trick, clicking on the television for the sake of noise.

9:30, 9:45, 10:00. Charlie's curfew, why hadn't he come home from the movies yet? She would remember pushing through the screen door, throwing her weight into a rusted aluminum chair on the wonky fieldstone porch. A November night, summery crickets still chirping. A sound of heavy paws crunching through the scrubby mesquite and bunch grass that lined the creek downhill. Eve was just forty. Maybe, before her boys even left home, she could go back to school, become some sort of a scholar? Maybe she could leave West Texas altogether, leave her sad-sack whiskey-swilling husband, and get a Ph.D. at a school not so far from the one—maybe even the same school?—that Oliver would attend. The truth was, Eve couldn't imagine any future whose every day was not involved with Oliver—well, with both her boys, but (no denying it) with Oliver in particular. She knew it would be a kind of death for her, Oliver's graduation.

Something in her atmosphere fell silent. The dryer, she remembered.

One last cruelty. Eve, glad for activity, took extra care sorting the family laundry that night. It could have been ten minutes she spent there, absently folding and refolding. She arranged the clothes neatly in the wicker basket. She grasped its straw handles and carried it in the direction of the bedroom. She was already well past the television when she paused. Like the time, as a ten-year-old, she had broken her arm in her one failed experiment with skateboarding, at the moment of impact she felt only a perplexing numbness. A picture on the television screen. A riot of squad car lights, the image shaken and smeary. She turned back to the television, but could make no sense of what the woman, Tricia Flip of Action News Six, was explaining into the camera. *Impossible*: that was the first word Eve thought then, the word that already bound Eve to hundreds of mothers like her, mothers whom she had until that night abstractly pitied as she had watched the news of sudden, eruptive violence in far-off places, thinking: *Impossible*, no, why add such a calamity to her long litany of anxieties, a thing like that could never happen in a place like theirs. And yet, in the kitchen, the telephone was screaming. She dropped

the basket, its contents spilling on the floor. She stumbled over the laundry, lurched for the phone. She put it to her ear, and try as she might, there would never be a way to forget the instant that followed.

Nearly ten years later: the boundless beige of desert, a flesh drawn tight, freckled with thorned vegetation, rusting industrial equipment, the occasional longhorn kept for nostalgia's sake, subsisting mysteriously on dead grass and stubbornness. A vein of asphalt, running north from the Big Bend of the Rio Grande, cut the desert in two. The chugging gray Hyundai, taking the road at ninety miles per hour, seemed, even to its driver, hardly there at all. An insect on the skin, Eve could have been flicked away.

She gritted particles of sand between her molars, sniffed at the car's stale gassiness, as the road began to widen to link up with the elaborate circulatory system of Interstate 10. And there, at the happenstance flat where road met road, the great cement boxes and oversized corporate signage for the newish shopping center came into view. A shopping center a hundred miles from where her paralytic son shuddered in his sheets, and still she could feel Oliver there with her. Eve knew Oliver had woken to another unmarked morning in Bed Four at Crockett State Assisted Care Facility, but Oliver was also in her feet, her hands, the dampness under her collar, as she turned into the parking lot for the chain bookstore, Tall Tales Books & More, the state's largest bookseller west of the Pecos River. Breathing the heavy fug that her lousy car's AC only pushed around, Eve parked just twenty feet from the wide automatic front doors. It was nine in the morning, the sun already high enough to rouse whirling mirages from the concrete. Glimpsing her reflection in the shop's tinted windows, she thought that it still wasn't too late to turn around. She plucked sharply at her right eyelid, the skin slurping away from the bloodshot globe beneath, and she examined the bulbous white head of the little lash she'd pulled free. The tart throb of pain steadied her for exactly five seconds.

It was July twenty-second, the day of Oliver's first real exam in many years. A hundred miles south of the bookstore, a functional magnetic resonance imaging machine was warming up for him now. Of course Oliver had undergone similar tests before, but that was no comfort to Eve this morning. Eve had long ago learned to believe the unlikeliest promises that her own hope, like some charlatan televangelist, outrageously issued, but she wasn't enough of a believer to fail to understand what today's test would mean. It had been nine years since Oliver's last round of neuroimaging; today likely marked Eve's last hope that the doctors might locate any trace awareness left in her son's jailed mind. To think of this day, over the past weeks, was to invite a dread that was tidal and annihilating, the white wall of a tsunami thundering toward her across the desert floor. Eve hoisted herself out of the car, through the furnace of West Texan July, into the better boxed oxygen inside the bookshop.

Other than a couple of bleary-eyed employees sipping brownish slushies behind the counter, the store was empty. In an attempt to go unnoticed, Eve made swift progress to the Science Fiction/Fantasy section. Since the moment she woke to the terrible fact of today's date, the object had gleamed brightly in the glass display case of her mind, like some kind of lucky charm to ward off bad outcomes. The object: a boxed collector's set that held the five-volume saga of Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Oliver had begged her for it once, when he was fifteen, but she hadn't been able to afford it then, and she could afford it even less today.

But there it was, on the bottom row of one of the faux-oak bookcases. Like a little piece of her son, on a shelf. Her lower back shrieking, Eve stooped and her tailbone landed hard on the navy carpet. As Beethoven's Fifth rattled the PA system, she dislodged the box and palmed the weight, back and forth, like a football. Stage two of her procedure was to assess the store for skeptical eyes and security cameras, but today, with the weight of those books in her hands, Eve's surveillance was lackadaisical, hardly more than a quick eye roll.

Eve knew she was not, as Charlie often liked to claim, *delusional*. She was aware, even as she peeled a magnetic tag from the box's bottom, that even if the impossible thing happened, and Oliver rose from the bed in which he had spent the last nine and a half years, he likely would not have much immediate use for the works of Douglas Adams. But the urge worked like any superstition, something in which she did not really believe, something she could even laugh at inwardly, and yet some atavistic, totem-worshipping part of her was afraid to resist. She couldn't do anything about the test scheduled for today, but here was a self-made test she could pass: Did she believe in a future for her son or didn't she? She unclasped her wide red leather purse, and she dropped the box's pleasing heft inside. She pressed the jagged edges of her chewed fingernails against the bookshelf's lip and rose, made swift progress past the security monitors that flanked the automatic doors. They triggered no alarm. Sweating immensely beneath her blazer, she made it as far as the blinding white pavement outside before a set of thick fingers found her wrist.

"Whoo boy," the man said.

The security guy's name, according to the brass plate on his desk in a tiny, egg-scented back office, was Ron Towers. Eve had met Ron once before, in his previous position at the local Old Navy franchise across the expressway. She remembered his crusty maritime face, as if Old Navy hired its muscle through some casting process. Ron Towers was silently considering her now, like some riddle he was trying to solve. Recognition lit his raw features. "Loving," he said. "Eve Loving."

She nodded, and Ron Towers nodded, too, looking pleased with himself. "It's those crazy eyes of yours. How could I forget those eyes?"

"How could I forget a Ron Towers?"

Ron sneered and typed her name into the computer on his desk. He hit enter and grinned. "Looks like we've got a serious uh-oh here."

“Uh-oh,” she echoed as Ron consulted a gray metal filing cabinet. He thumbed through the contents of a drawer, retrieved a document, and displayed it like a certificate of accomplishment.

“Any return will be considered trespassing. Any further shoplifting will be referred to police action.” Ron nudged the document toward her. She didn’t need to read it. She was familiar with its content.

The list of stores from which Eve Loving was blacklisted had grown. Over the last nine years, in the sallow back rooms of major Big Bend retailers, she had signed a number of similar contracts. The paunchy or gangly guards always put on the kind of tough-guy bravado that Ron showed her now. “We don’t need your kind of business here,” they’d unoriginally tell her as they searched her face. But the truly shameful part was that these guys’ close attention, their consideration of what she might contain behind her nervous smile, always seemed like a potential antidote to her solitude. As those self-serious men led her by the elbow with a firm hand, she could feel the relieving possibility of confession, the sense that everything in her past months and years was at last coming to a climax. When those men lectured Eve, threatened her, wielded their dinky power behind their cheap nameplates, she felt her whole story rise up in her. And yet, in the end, they were always satisfied by her apologies and a contract. The madness or sorrow that might compel a fiftyish woman to steal a book meant for a teenager: a question that a man like Ron Towers was satisfied to consign to another signed document in a desk drawer.

“So what do we do now?” Ron didn’t say anything more, only looked at Eve as if she’d done something other than shoplift a boxed set, as if he really might be trying to suss out a deeper kind of guilt. She eyed the telephone on his desk. She thought of making a break for the door. Ron Towers was grinning, a little lasciviously.

In a decade of many cruel paradoxes, one of the greatest tricks that her tragic forties had played on Eve was the way that grief seemed to have sharpened whatever latent beauty she had possessed. As her

face had thinned, the overlarge eyes had become cartoon-princess-like in their enormity. All the days she had spent outside to escape the musty stuffiness of her house had toasted her Semitic features with a pleasant brownish glaze. Her back troubles made her stick out her pert rear end like a bustle, made her carry her breasts like a waiter offering a tray of hors d'oeuvres. What might it mean, Eve tried not to wonder, that she wore her suffering so attractively?

"Please," Eve said.

"The one thing I'll never get," Ron mused, "is why a nice lady like you would do it. Some poor kid, sure. Some toothless meth head, that's natural. But a lady like you, is it just the thrill?"

She couldn't tell if this was only part of his chest-thumping display or if Ron Towers might actually be troubled. This rosacea-faced man was a poor judge for her life's crimes, but she was relieved to tell him, "I'm Oliver Loving's mother."

He squinted. Did he possibly recognize the name? There was no doubt that he would have heard about her family on the news, back when it happened. In the news stream spectacle that had followed that worst night, the Lovings had perhaps become the most pitiable of all those families to be so piously and publically pitied. But all that was nearly ten years ago. Ron Towers, living a hundred miles away, had likely forgotten all about Hector Espina and Bliss Township School.

"My son is in pieces. He's scattered all over the world," Eve told Ron now. "And I have to pick them up." Eve had learned the trick of the homeless and the imprisoned; bad behavior has an inflection point. Act a little strangely and people will correct you, act oddly enough and people will clear you a wide berth.

"Excuse me?" Ron asked.

She reached across Ron's desk then, for one of his massive, furry hands. Ron did not pull away as she held it like another creature, something injured they had just found together, which they could both worry over. She felt Ron's clunky class ring, its cheap gemstone, and she twisted it loose, as if it were choking his finger. This hand,

she knew, was connected to Ron Towers's haughty, reddened face, but it really did feel separate from him now, like some other object Eve wanted to slip into her purse. She lifted its mass, and she kissed it. But then she made the mistake of looking up. Her gaze on him severed whatever strange spell had momentarily altered the space between them. He pulled his hand away, wiped it against the papers on his desk.

"You need help," Ron Towers said.

The clock on Eve's dashboard showed 9:53, the digits dimly throbbing with the engine. The Hyundai, which Oliver had long ago named Goliath, clanked and sputtered as she pulled out of her parking spot. Now that Ron Towers had let her free, she had no excuse not to retrace the route of the morning errand, ninety-four miles deep into the desert.

The roads between the shopping center and Crockett State Assisted Care Facility traversed an emptiness so vast it was claustrophobic. The same five chaparral plants—the goofy heads of grama grass, the Gothic tangling fingers of ocotillo, the low paddled clusters of prickly pear, the surreal candelabras of century plants, the spiny, landlocked sea urchins called lechuguilla—repeated themselves all the way to the deadness of the mountains to the south and the horizon to the north. Thirty years she had been living in the state's westernmost notch, and Eve still had not gotten over the strangeness of all that Texan earth, the extraterrestrial aspect of the empty space that lay in the triple-digit mileage between the Big Bend's few towns. Now shakily powering through the Chihuahuan Desert at a hundred miles an hour, Goliath was like some sci-fi vessel, one of those battered spaceships plundering the galaxy on the covers of Oliver's old paperbacks.

Eve was not a daughter of Texas. She was a daughter of nowhere in particular, the only child of a single-father car salesman, Mortimer Frankl, who had schlepped her around the American West in his

maroon 1976 Cutlass Supreme. After her father's death put an end to an unhappy childhood spent mostly in crestfallen hotel rooms and musty sublets where there was never enough space, when Eve met Jed Loving, she had thrilled to the freedom promised by his home's two hundred acres. She could not have suspected how little those acres would hold for her. The Apache, Jed's mother once told her, thought this desert was what remained after the world's creation. The spare raw materials, the leftovers of better places.

"People go to New York to become something," Charlie theorized once. "But they go to the Big Bend to become nothing."

Nearly a decade had passed and even still she couldn't graft this ruined life onto the simple linearity of time *before*. In a single instant, a twenty-one-year-old boy named Hector Espina had shattered time. More than nine and a half years ago Eve had been a full-time mother, already in the twilight years of that profession, staring down the lonesome ambiguities of the forty or so unclaimed, childless years unfurling from the front door of Zion's Pastures. A decade later, she was a de facto (if not yet de jure) divorcée, the mother of one son lost to violence, the other to his own selfishness. She lived alone in the erstwhile "show home" of an abortive neighborhood complex called Desert Splendor, a failed subdivision of unoccupied homes and half-built house skeletons on a high desert flat. Her new house was plagued. It longed to become a ruin. That April, when she tried to start her air conditioner, it spoke its fitful last words and died. "Maintenance," the management company said over the phone, "per our agreement, is your responsibility."

Eve shifted with a grunt in the threadbare driver's seat, unsettled by the grinding pain in her lower back. Having two children with a West Texan had given Eve a vocabulary moralistically devoid of expletives, but now she let loose a hot torrent of them. "Fuck!" Eve shouted. "Fuck, fuck, fuck you!"

She pulled Goliath to a stop fifteen miles shy of Crockett State Assisted Care Facility, into a square of tarmac that framed Señor Buddy's Filling Station. Outside, on a high metal column, stood the

old billboard tribute to Reginald Avalon, a faded photo of Bliss Township School's slain theater teacher, back in his youth as a locally famous Tejano musician, in his mariachi getup, singing to the scrubbed blue heavens, a biblical scroll unfurling beneath him: REG AVALON, REST IN PEACE, BELOVED TEACHER. And Eve knew that a couple of lines of Oliver's poem were there, too, just to the right of Mr. Avalon's portrait, and she was glad they were there, but it was just too much to look up at them today.

Oliver's poem, "Children of the Borderlands," had become a kind of anthem for the grieving town of Bliss. It was something that Oliver had written for his English class in the last weeks *before*, and its lines had been reproduced dozens of times now, in local papers and commemorative materials; "Children of the Borderlands" had even appeared once in the pages of a statewide magazine. Though it was true that her son had evinced a startling way with words, Eve understood that the reason for this poem's celebration was mostly just the sentimentalizing sorrow of her town. But, apparently, the highly localized literary renown that tragedy had lent to Oliver had inspired something in his younger brother. Today, somewhere in a benighted apartment in New York City, Charlie was following in Oliver's footsteps, giving his early twenties to some book he was supposedly writing, telling the tragic tale of his brother, the doomed bard of Bliss.

Still trembling a bit from the adrenaline rush of the scene in Ron Towers's office, Eve pushed through the door of Señor Buddy's. When she saw the face of the cashier, Eve felt betrayed. Why did the universe wait until today to place Abbie Wolcott behind the counter? But if it were any other day, Eve would already have arrived at Crockett State for visiting hours. How long had Abbie, her husband's old colleague, her son's old calculus teacher, been working the Señor Buddy's daytime shift? Desert Splendor sat fifty miles from what was left of the town of Bliss, and for the sake of eluding the dreadful heart plunge that was happening now beneath her ribs, Eve tried, as best she could, to avoid the places she knew the old Blissians still frequented.

"Eve! My God!"

"Abbie. You work here now."

Abbie Wolcott's once handsome, blockish frame had expanded to linebacker proportions. Her face, beneath her feathery, bleached bangs, had the blank innocence of a collie. Eve nearly pitied her for a moment, sympathy that a bright burst of Abbie's cheer instantly atomized.

"I do! It ain't glamorous, but it gets me out of the house."

"That's great."

"Plus I get to chat with people all day long. You know me, a regular chatterbox."

"Sounds perfect for you then."

Abbie made a big cartoonish shrug, something from a *Cathy* comic strip.

"How *are* you?" Abbie asked. "It's been forever."

"Yeah, forever." Both women fell silent, considering the last time they'd met, years ago, when Eve turned Abbie away at the door to Oliver's room, declining the casserole that Abbie clearly hoped she might exchange for insider gossip. But Abbie had been only one of a great many visitors to Bed Four. For the first year or so *after*, a few blackly dressed classmates, many teachers, the parents of the dead, the stooped principal Doyle Dixon, and the occasional religious leader would still show up, uninvited, at visiting hours, to put their hands on the one boy for whom the tragedy was still not yet at an end.

"How is he?" Abbie asked now. Eve could see the great effort it took Abbie Wolcott to dim her sprightliness to match Eve's face.

"Advil," Eve pointed to the rows of packaging behind the counter. "He? You mean Oliver? He's fine, Abbie. Just fine. I'm sorry, but I'm in a hurry. Six dollars?"

"Five ninety-five." Abbie Wolcott's voice was glum and empathetic.

"Right."

"You know," Abbie said, "I still keep Oliver in my prayers every night."

Feeling in her purse for the money, Eve pressed the edges of a coin until her fingertips began to ache. “All right.”

“And all of you, too. Charlie. Jed. Poor Jed.”

“Poor Jed,” Eve said.

“Hey, do you want to buy one of these? It’s for that memorial they’re trying to build. For the tenth anniversary.”

Abbie gestured to a corrugated box of bumper stickers beneath a sign that said \$5. On the sticker, amid clip art of praying hands, crucifixes, and angels, was the slogan that had become the official death rattle of the town of Bliss, Texas. WE REMEMBER THE FIFTEENTH OF NOVEMBER. Eve hated that phrase, its bombastic, Orwellian undertone. And the memorial dreamt up by the Fifteenth of November set was plainly contemptible. One of those mothers once mailed her an artist’s rendering of their vision: four iron crosses, vaguely in the style of the famous cruciform I-beam that was left of the World Trade Center after the attacks. Four crosses, representing the four murdered. But what about Eve’s son? A half cross, maybe? Just the horizontal beam? Well, Oliver *was* half Jewish.

“Anniversary, huh?” Eve said. “Like a special occasion.”

“It’s a nice thing. A good thing they are doing. A way to remember.”

“Honestly, Abbie, that whole town is a memorial. Why would we need another?”

Abbie could hardly manage a shrug now. “Eve.” Abbie rubbed at her ear. “You aren’t alone in this.”

Abbie said this with her bland, Christian-comfort voice, but of course Eve knew it was also a kind of reprimand. Abbie meant that small army of grieving families, friends, teachers, and classmates, officially called Families of the Fifteenth of November, who were behind the big memorial plans. It was largely parents who comprised the group; the children had mostly vanished from the area, hoping (Eve supposed, and who could blame them?) to put that night at a great distance behind them, both geographically and psychologically.

Back in the driver's seat, when Eve reached into the brown paper sack for her pills, she found that Abbie Wolcott had slipped in a complimentary bumper sticker. WE REMEMBER THE FIFTEENTH OF NOVEMBER. As if anyone out there could ever forget. As if she and Oliver both were not still sealed inside that date. As if all the questions of that night, all Eve knew and couldn't know about what had happened to her son, could ever fade into the past. WE REMEMBER THE FIFTEENTH OF NOVEMBER. There was so much Eve tried not to remember, her whole past lying stained and shattered on the floor of that schoolhouse classroom. *Why?* She had worked so hard not to think about it, had tried to narrow her concerns to the ten-by-ten room that held Bed Four, but almost ten years later, that question was still in the room with her, every day.