

## Hill Kids · Diane Sullivan Mertens

I USED TO TEACH KIDS from the foothills of Appalachia. Kids with problems, trapped by poverty. Crazy kids, they called themselves. Now I am a writer. Not that I didn't write then. I wrote plenty. I wrote lesson plans and mandated Individualized Educational Plans, and formal letters to psychologists and pleas to parents and fleeting thoughts on survival to myself. And once, on behalf of a student, I almost wrote a letter to a judge. But Slade's court-appointed lawyer called me before I ever had the chance. Called my apartment at dawn, and said that, during the night, the prisoner sharing Slade's cell had run a broomstick up Slade.\*

A broomstick?

Yes, the lawyer said, do you get the picture? He said this in a polite voice. I imagined the man, far up the road from where I lived, near the university, sitting at his desk, an oil painting of the distant foothills opposite him, talking into the phone to me, and wishing he hadn't been appointed to represent Slade. Slade, a six-foot boy from the hills who couldn't read or write, who stole whatever he needed, whose eyes were in constant darting motion, a condition that left no one knowing exactly where Slade was looking. Slade, who lived in a shack with his brother and sister and mother, and his mother's friend who beat the living hell out of him. Slade, who when angry, had once stood in class and yelled that I was a goddamn bitch.

Would it be correct, asked Slade's lawyer, to say that Slade is retarded? If so, the judge will take pity. Hello? You *are* the teacher he contacted yesterday when he was allowed a call?

Yes, I said, wrapping the phone cord round my wrist. I'm the one. *They done stuck me in jail, Miss. Sorry. Don't want you seeing me here. Only, ain't nobody but you done getting me out.*

Now, said Slade's lawyer, when you talked with Slade, did he mention the borrowed truck? And that he robbed a gas station? The boy is twenty? Right? You don't sound much older yourself. Twenty-four, I said. That's all? said the lawyer. Slade is one tough cookie for a young girl. Would you say that Slade is retarded? You do realize the situation will deteriorate?

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\*Names have been changed.

Pardon me?

Deteriorate. The prisoners are not nice guys. The broomstick was only the beginning. I stared out my kitchen window. Three floors up, view of the parking lot. Housing for college students. Nights, I was working toward my Master's in Learning and Emotional Disorders. Days, I drove twenty miles south into the hills and taught high school. On paper, my students were classified "mentally impaired," their I.Q. scores landing them in special education until they graduated or reached the age of twenty-one, whichever came first. Many of my boys tracked and shot and gutted and skinned squirrel and rabbit and deer, putting food on their family's table. And some of my boys planted and harvested and sold marijuana, the money they made putting clothes on their backs. They outstole the best of thieves and outwitted undercover cops and drew me into their lives and into their hills, taking me down a road I'd never forget.

Miss? said Slade's lawyer. Would you say Slade is retarded? The word banged in my head—*retardedretardedretarded*. A word I did not allow in our classroom, but nonetheless, one that escaped my kids' mouths in their moments of rage when they had nothing left to shout. *Fucking Crazy Retard*. You see, said the lawyer, this judge doesn't want to be known for locking up a retarded kid. Do you want Slade out of jail?

*Retardedretardedretarded*. Yes, I said. *You* could say Slade is retarded.

Case closed, said the lawyer. Sorry I had to be blunt. You sound like a nice kid. Maybe you should consider doing something else for a living. The phone clicked. Kid? I let the receiver fall from my hand, and it dangled by the cord and swung back and forth, knocking the wall, over and over. I'd thought, when Slade had been locked in jail once before, and then let go, that my efforts had brought him past the looting and the lying. Thought my efforts had brought him past the year before.

School buses idled on the far side of the parking lot, the smell of fuel caught in rain and fog. I pulled my backpack from the car and closed the door, then started toward the back of the school. Slade's younger brother Gust ran toward me, yelling, "Teacher, Teacher," his long legs leaping the puddles. He stopped in front of me, panting. "Miss, me and Slade's in a heap of trouble. Ma's old man dropped us in a field of chickens for eating. And the sheriff come. And Wayland, he done took off in his truck, leaving me and

Slade, only I hidded myself. But the sheriff grabbed up Slade and hauled him to jail.”

Kids passed, their voices loud. I stepped toward Gust. “Is Slade in jail now?”

“No, Teacher. They done let him go. And Slade said if’n I told you, he’d beat the piss out of me.” Rain pelted Gust’s face and streaked the dirt.

“Did the sheriff come back for Wayland?”

“Nope. But Ma cracked him good with a skillet for messing up my sister Dorcy.”

The buses pulled away from the school, gears grinding. “Come on,” I said. “Let’s go inside.”

“Can’t. Slade might see.” Gust lowered his head and ran the back of his hand beneath his nose. “Please, Teacher. Stealing chickens weren’t my idea. Don’t want no sheriff hauling me off.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “The sheriff won’t take you away.”

“Obliged, Miss.” Gust turned and ran toward the front of the school.

I ducked my head and hurried across the lot through the rain, opening the kitchen door to the smell of cornbread and chili. I waved to the cook and started down the back hall past the pantry, then stopped. Slade sat on a crate among the shelves of canned food, his thin windbreaker wet, his wide, bony shoulders splitting the seams, the sleeves inches above his wrists. He stared in my direction, his eyes flicking side to side. “Just might beat the piss out of that boy.”

I stepped into the pantry. “I’d like for you to tell me what happened.”

“Ain’t nothing to tell.”

“Slade?”

“Shit,” he said, then ran his fingers through his hair, pushing it back from his face. He stared down at the floor and tapped the toe of his boots against the tile. “Ain’t much to it. Excepting the son of a bitch left me for the sheriff.” Slade cocked his head. “Know what that sheriff said? He said, ‘Boy, you getting a job, or you taking after the crazy motherfucker in that there truck?’ And know what I said?”

I lowered my backpack to the floor and sat on the crate beside Slade. He smelled of must and grime. “What did you say?”

“I told that sheriff I don’t got me no plans. And he slapped handcuffs on me and throwed me in the back of his car. Hauled me clean to the city and locked me up for the night.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. Slade leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees. The back of his neck was creased with dirt. “Tell me something. Before the sheriff came, was Dorcy with the three of you?”

Slade popped from the crate and kicked a sack of flour, white dust flying. “Gust tell you ’bout Dorcy? Baby ain’t mine. Ain’t bedded her in a few whiles. It’s that motherfucker’s.” He clenched his fists and glared down at me. “I’ve a mind to get his gun.”

Bags of rolls filled one shelf of the pantry. I stood, opened a bag and pulled four rolls free. I handed the rolls to Slade, then went out into the kitchen and got two cartons of milk. When I came back, Slade was sitting on the crate, the rolls gone. I handed him the milk, and he ripped open the spouts and drank, steady and fast, first one carton, then the other. I handed him the bag of rolls and slipped my backpack over my shoulder. “When you’re finished, please come to class.”

Slade stuffed his mouth with another roll. “Yes, Miss.”

I walked from the pantry and out the side of the kitchen, past the front office and rounded the corner of the back hall. Clay stood at the far end, drumming his hands against our door. I quickened my steps, passing empty classrooms. Reaching Clay, I said, “Good morning.” He stepped back and squinted, put his hands to his head and snapped a rubber band about his dark hair, his wrist rotating fast, then flipped his ponytail over the neck of his blue flannel. His eyes were red, and he smelled of marijuana. I put my key in the lock, turned the handle and walked into our room, slipped my wet coat over the cabinet hook, then opened my backpack on my desk and took out the day’s work. Clay’s wet sneakers squeaked across the floor. He paced the room, going back and forth to the window, then suddenly stopped. He rubbed his eyes and stared at my dress, then turned toward the window and pressed his forehead against the glass.

The morning bell rang shrill. Noise filled the halls, kids shouting, lockers slamming. I went to the board and printed the day’s schedule. My kids started into the room, their hair matted, some with coats, some without. “A new day,” I called. “Please take your seats.” They jostled about, talking and laughing and scooting desks. Slade trailed in last. I went to the window where Clay stood. “Clay? Please take your seat.”

Clay spun around, wide-eyed. “Goddamn dots,” he yelled. The kids fell silent. Clay ground his fists against his lids, then pointed toward my collar, my belt, my cuffs. “Fucking dots humming. Take off your dress.”

The only sound was the tick of the clock. And then, Laney's strangling laughter cut through the room. I glared at her. "Laney. No." Her hand went to her mouth, her face sheet-white. Clay started in her direction. I stepped in front of him. He squinted down at me, and I stared back, calling out to Clay's younger brother Zachary, but Zachary didn't answer. I glanced toward the far corner of the room where he sat. He leveled his eyes and did not move. He'd only been my student for a month, and only because I'd asked for him. Asked after he'd been busted for smoking pot and dropped from the mainstream classes and dumped into Jenny Stein's junior high special class. Asked for him after he'd pulled a knife and threatened another kid, and Mr. Holt wanted rid of him, wanted him away from Creek Run. Wanted him in a detention center. I'd asked for Zachary, but my reason was selfish—if Zachary had been sent away, I would have lost Clay. And I'd worked too hard to let Clay walk out on me.

I motioned to Dugan. "Please take Clay outside. Sit with him in the dugout. Don't let him talk with anybody." Dugan nodded. He stood and walked from the room, the heavy silver chain of his wallet dangling from the back pocket of his jeans. "Go with Dugan," I said to Clay, and he stepped around me fast, his ponytail swinging, and disappeared out the door. I glanced toward Zachary. He tipped his chair onto the back legs and leaned his head against the concrete wall, his straight black hair hanging past his shoulders, then folded his arms over his chest and stared at me as if I'd taken something from him. Something he wanted back.

The rain had stopped, leaving behind the smell of worms, and of soil, washed clean. I walked toward the dugout, the wet field grass brushing my legs. Clay ran the bases, his hair loose, blowing behind him. He rounded home, shouting, "Home run," then raced toward first once more. I stepped around the edge of the dugout. Dugan sat at the end of the bench, whittling a block of wood with his pocketknife, his T-shirt sleeves rolled to his shoulders, his snake tattoo a purple-gray beneath the shadow of the dugout. He glanced at the diamond, shook his head, and went back to whittling.

I sat on the bench, tucking my dress beneath my legs. Clay ran, peeling off his flannel as he passed third base, then rounded home, shouting, and kept on. "Might be here till dark," Dugan said. "Clay's pretty strung out."

"Marijuana?"

"Yep. Wacky weed."

“Where?”

Dugan snapped his knife closed. “Right where we sit.”

I pressed my hands to the bench. “The two of you?”

“And Zachary.” Dugan tossed the wood onto the dirt, took a toothpick from his T-shirt pocket and stuck it in his mouth. “Me and Zachary had us one. Clay there, he smoked a few.”

I stared toward the diamond. Clay’s sneakers sat on home plate, and Clay had run far beyond the bases, out to the pond. He ran the edge, his arms out, as if he were flying. I turned to Dugan. “Thanks for being honest. And thanks for watching Clay.” I stood. “I better go. The kids will be back from gym.” I waved to Clay and started from the dugout.

“Hey,” said Dugan. I turned. He pulled the toothpick from his mouth and winked. “Just so you know, I like your dress mighty fine.”

Hank opened his can of bottle caps and dumped a small pile on his desktop. “One,” he shouted, waving his arm, motioning me toward him. “One. Got me one.”

“Great, Hank,” I said. I stood beside Billy Dean and watched as he began his next math problem, his long skinny fingers gripping his pencil, his fingernails caked black. He glanced up at me, his cheekbones sharp in his thin face. “Good job,” I said. “Show me the next one, please.” Billy Dean leaned low over his paper, and when I patted his back, I saw, flecked about the crown of his head, lice.

“Ten,” barked Hank. “Got me ten caps. Ten.”

The door opened. Clay came into the room, breathless, his face flushed, Dugan behind him, shoving Clay toward me. They stopped on the other side of Billy Dean’s desk. Dugan wrapped his fingers around Clay’s shoulder, and squeezed. “Say it.”

Clay glanced at my dress. “Sorry about your dots.” He rolled forward on his toes and grinned. “They ain’t humming.” Dugan squeezed harder and Clay’s face pinched. “And sorry I said them words you don’t like.”

Dugan let go of Clay, slapped his shoulder and said, “Sit yourself down and mind your manners.” Clay licked his lips and bounced toward his desk.

“Six. Got me six,” shouted Hank. “Six.”

“Good, Hank. I’ll be with you in a minute.” I glanced once more at the lice in Billy Dean’s hair, then squatted beside him, my hands on the edge of his desk. “You’re doing a fine job. Keep going.” I stood and went to the

front of the room, pulling my chair next to Hank. "Let's start with number one. 'John had three horses. His brother had four cows. How many animals did John and his brother have?'"

Hank scratched his head, and together we worked his problems, Hank scraping cap after cap across the wood, bellowing numbers out of sequence. We got to the last problem. "Need caps," Hank said. He dropped his arm to reach for the can, and his arm hit the desk and the can fell to the floor, bottle caps clattering and rolling all directions. He stuck his leg beyond the desk and dragged his boot through the caps. "Lots of caps," he mumbled. "Lots of caps."

I glanced around the room. Billy Dean sat stick straight and brought one finger at a time to the tip of his nose and moved his lips, counting without sound. Slade sat with his legs straight out in front of him, his boots beneath Laney's chair, his head leaning against the wall. Becca sat with the other girls, her voice light, going over the figures on their worksheets, balancing the bills of our fictitious Mr. and Mrs. Everybody. Clay squirmed in his seat and shuffled his math papers, chattering to himself. Zachary held a book in his hands, his eyes going from the page, to Clay, to me.

The noon bell rang. "Have a nice lunch," I called. Slade was first from the room, the others fast behind. Hank sat with his mouth open, staring at the bottle caps. "Go on, Hank. I don't want you to miss lunch," I said, and then Hank lumbered out, slamming the door. I knelt in the silence, the cold tile hard against my knees, and gathered Hank's caps, dropping them into the can, one by one.

The day wound to an end. I dismissed the kids and headed for Mr. Holt's office. He sat behind his desk, filing papers. I took the chair opposite him and began Slade's story, telling about Gust and Slade and the chickens and jail. And Slade's mother's live-in friend and Dorcy and the baby. Mr. Holt slid his desk drawer shut, picked up his pipe, and tamped the tobacco. "Why are you telling me this?"

"I want to file a report with Children's Services," I said. "Once they investigate, the man will be arrested. Or at the very least, he'll have to leave."

"Wrong," said Mr. Holt. "Wayland Jessup doesn't go anywhere he doesn't want to go."

"Then Children's Services will have to remove the kids."

Mr. Holt put his pipe to his mouth and struck a match. He held the flame over the bowl and stared at me while he puffed, the smell of tobacco drifting. On the wall behind him, off to one side, hung a map of Creek Run School District, bus routes traced in black, red pin heads marking stops, blue pin heads marking dead ends. "Listen," Mr. Holt said. "Within the year, Slade will be twenty years old. Dorcy and Gust aren't far behind. You can't change their lives."

"I can't ignore this," I said.

"If you want to survive here," he said, his voice hushed, "you'll learn to ignore what you can't change."

I sat forward on the chair. "I refuse to turn my head."

"What about the rest of your class?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Mr. Holt sat back in his chair and drew on the stem of his pipe, smoke swirling his face. "If you report Wayland Jessup, Wayland Jessup will get you long before they get him. Wayland Jessup will blow your brains out, and your class won't have a teacher until I can find a new one. One who can accept that life is different in the hills."

Early the next morning, the janitor unlocked the guidance counselor's office, and I stepped inside, flicked on the light, closed the door behind me, and sat at the desk. I dialed Children's Services, asked for Mrs. Finch, and waited for Billy Dean's caseworker to come on the line.

"Mrs. Finch speaking."

"This is Miss Sullivan," I said, "calling from Creek Run about Billy Dean Beacon. Billy Dean's head lice are back. I was hoping you'd make another home visit."

"Miss Sullivan, you know that I visited the Beacons last month. I told their mother what to do."

"I'm sure you did," I said. "But it's very difficult for her to care for ten children. They have no running water and no heat. I don't see how the woman is to rid her family of lice."

"We've done our best with the Beacons," clipped Mrs. Finch. "We no more than find them a place to live than they disappear to another county, only to resurface months later. This last time they returned, they were living in a truck."



“I know,” I said. “I was just hoping you’d make another visit. And that you could find them a place to live where they’d have running water.”

The line went silent. A paperweight sat before me on a stack of forms. I held it up to the light, pink and gray edging the glass. “Do you realize,” said Mrs. Finch, “how impossible it is to find a landlord willing to let the Beacons live on their property? Especially now, with their father in the mental institution?”

“There must be a landlord somewhere.”

Mrs. Finch clicked her tongue. “As for the lice, I’ll make one more visit. Thank you for your call.”

“Wait, please,” I said. “When you go to the Beacons, on your way back through Junction, would you please stop at Slade Coleman’s house?”

“Regarding what?”

“Dorcy is pregnant. And Slade is angry, real angry, that his mother has a live-in friend.”

“Slade is no longer on our caseload,” Mrs. Finch said. “You have to understand that we have regulations regarding what we can and cannot do.”

“Would you stop at the Coleman’s? To see how their situation could be improved?”

“Miss Sullivan, have you been to their home?”

“No.”

“I’m sorry you’ve missed the pleasure,” she said. “Otherwise, you wouldn’t be so quick to pass judgment. And since you so freely offer advice, I would like to offer this—you stick with your teaching, and let me be the social worker.”

The road to Slade’s ran south from Creek Run, twisting past farmland, weathered barns and outbuildings scattered in the fields, and then the road split and narrowed, dropped around a bend and wound into a valley, ending at the crossroad to Junction. I turned left, pulled off at Stahlworth’s General Store, switched off my lights and waited as a man backed his truck from the lot, then climbed from my car and walked by Stahlworth’s sagging porch. Cans of vegetables and sacks of potatoes and boxes of oats lined the ledge behind the dingy glass. I ducked around the far side of the store and stood in the shadows.

Slade's clapboard house sat planted in the adjoining yard, the light from inside, dim, casting strange shapes on the grayed plastic that hung over the windows. There was no porch, no grass, no walk. Beside the house, the rusted frame of a car sat in the dirt, tires missing, windows smashed. Loud voices came from within the house, sharp and angry, and then a door slammed. I stepped behind a tree. Wind blew, rustling the leaves. Slade came from the back of the house and walked toward the rusted car. He leaned against the hood, lit a cigarette, and tossed the match onto the dirt. The voices came again, loud and fast. Slade glanced toward the house, then yanked the passenger door open and slid across the seat. He put both hands to the wheel, his cigarette dangling from his lips, the tip glowing, and the frogs took up their night songs.

The next morning, Slade and I were alone in our classroom, the others off at study hall. He stood before the open door of our cabinet, admiring himself in the mirror, his hands in the pockets of the green jacket my younger brother had peeled from his back and offered when I'd traveled home the weekend before, a jacket with a warm lining and pockets and zippers. "I like it," Slade said. "Mighty glad your brother done outgrewed it." He ran his hand over the collar, pulled the zipper up and down. "Thanks a heap."

"You're welcome," I said. "You look nice."

He grabbed his windbreaker from the counter. "Beats this dang thing." He walked to his desk, stuffed his windbreaker on the shelf beneath his chair, and dropped into his seat.

I took a seat near him. "Before the others get back, there's something I need to talk with you about. I owe it to Dorcy, and to you, to say that Wayland was wrong for sleeping with Dorcy. And it's wrong for you to sleep with Dorcy. If a boy has sex with his sister, and she gets pregnant, the baby will have problems. Big problems. But beyond the baby having problems, it's against the law to sleep with your sister. Do you understand?"

Slade shifted in his seat. "Told you, I ain't bedded her in a few whiles."

"I'm glad. But I want you to realize that you must never sleep with Dorcy again. Never. And years from now, when you have children, or stepchildren, you must never sleep with them. I know that you've seen this happening. But it must stop. The man who lives with your mother is

wrong. Wrong for what he did to Dorcy. Wrong for making you and Gust steal. Wrong for leaving you behind and letting you go to jail.”

Slade rubbed his hand across his chin, then up and down the side of his face. “Yea.”

“Because of what he has done,” I said, “that man must leave your house. I want to come and talk with your mother.”

“Done told you once, you come his way, you be laid or shot.”

“Would you like to move out? You and Gust and Dorcy?” I asked. “If you want to move out, I’ll call the caseworker, and we’ll try to find a place for you.”

Slade glared. He fiddled with the bottom of his new jacket, then yanked the zipper up the front. “Move out why for?”

“If you move out, that man can’t bother Dorcy. He can’t get you in trouble with the law. He can’t beat you.”

Slade shrugged. “My old lady won’t hear it.”

“But if you did move out, the three of you, your mother would see that he should leave, and then you’d go back home.”

Slade shook his head. “Life ain’t like that.”

“Life can be that way,” I said. “I want to help you.”

“Don’t want nothing,” Slade said. “Son of a bitch, kill us all. Anyways, he’ll get his. My old man ain’t in the pen forever.”

Odd-shaped clouds, edged dark gray, hung over the valley, moving on the wind. I turned from the window and started between the rows, setting folders on the desktops. “Miss?” Slade stood in the doorway, his thin windbreaker tight about him. His face was pale, the circles under his eyes, black. “That there jacket,” he said, his voice catching, “he done took it off my back. Put it on his.” Slade’s hands went to his face, covered his eyes, and he wailed, the sound low and long, like a wounded animal. I set the folders on a desktop and went to Slade, put my hand to his arm, and he jerked away, yanked his windbreaker over his head and hurled it through the air. He pushed through the rows, desks crashing, folders falling, papers flying. He reached the far end of the room, kicked the heater, and whirled around. “Break the motherfucker’s neck. Clean.” His chest pumped, and his torn T-shirt hung loose about his neck, the blue of his veins, pressing his skin. “He don’t have no right,” he screamed. “No. Fucking. Right.”

Slade stared in my direction, his eyes flicking, his chest heaving and heaving and heaving. Then, he stared at the overturned desks, the scattered papers. He wiped the back of his hand across his forehead, then dropped his arm to his side. He drew in a deep breath, and his chest shuddered. He started where he stood, picking the desks up from the floor, straightening the rows. I went to the middle of the room and gathered the papers and the folders from the floor, then took them to my desk and started the day once again, the soft sound of papers being sorted, mingled with the sound of Slade's footsteps against the tile, of the scraping of the desks, of the heavy sound of his breathing.

He straightened the last desk, then grabbed his windbreaker from the floor, went to the cabinet, opened the door and stood before the mirror. He pulled the windbreaker over his head, worked his arms into the sleeves and yanked the bottom toward his waist. He ran his fingers through the front of his hair, turned toward me, and said, "Know what he done told me? He said if'n I take back my jacket, he's breaking my arm. Making him a liar, 'cause he's a mind for breaking both my arms. And know what?"

"No," I said.

Slade squared his shoulders. "Freeze my ass off 'fore giving him a chance."

Three days running, Zachary and Clay didn't come to school, didn't answer their phone. I drove the narrow dirt road to Dog Holler, a road I could drive with my eyes closed, a road I traveled in my dreams, snaking between the hills, passing lone shacks, the yards scattered with junk. When I got to the Coder's hill I pulled off the road and picked my way to the top of their muddy lane. Their mother's car was gone, their dogs, not in sight. I crossed the yard, walked up the porch steps and knocked, over and over, then went down the steps and walked the incline along the side of the house to where the tin roof pitched downward and met the ground. I glanced up the rusted tin to where the door into Clay and Zachary's bedroom stood closed, the worn wood cracked and splintered. I glanced behind me, into the dense woods. Sunlight filtered between the trees and danced upon the gnarled bark. I stepped onto the tin, hooking the heels of my leather boots on the edge. "Zachary? Clay?" I called, their names echoing, the sound of my voice coming back to me. I stood in the silence and watched as tree shadows swept the tin.

Underbrush snapped. I spun around, stumbling from the roof. At the edge of the woods stood a black horse, and on its back sat Zachary, a red bandanna tied about his head. He was bare-chested, and his hair hung dark against his shoulders. His faded jeans were splattered with mud, and he wore no shoes. He glanced up the tin roof, toward his door, then down the hill toward my car, then at me. “You looking for something?”

“Clay. You and Clay,” I said. “I came to see why you haven’t been at school.”

“Clay ain’t here.”

“You’re here.”

“Yep.” He pressed his heels into the horse’s side and the horse snorted and stepped to where I stood. Zachary, in one swift movement, slid from the horse, his bare feet hitting the ground with a soft thud. Mixed with the smell of the woods—the moss, the dried leaves—was the smell of marijuana and the horse.

“When will your mother be home?”

“Don’t know.”

The horse put his nose in my face, in my hair. I pulled my hair off to one side, dropping it over my shoulder, then put my hands behind my back, my fingers in the ends. “You don’t know, or you aren’t telling?”

“Don’t know.” He put his hand to the horse’s neck, made a clicking sound, and the horse trotted into the woods, sticks cracking beneath his hoofs. Zachary half-closed one eye and studied my face. “Seems like everybody took off. Left me alone.”

“It also seems, Zachary, that you wouldn’t want the truant officer coming here. Not for Clay, and not for you.”

“Truant officer comes my way, he’ll find nobody,” Zachary said. “Deep woods here.”

“Is that where Clay is? In the woods?”

“Clay don’t want trouble,” Zachary said. “Seems you ain’t willing to let things be.”

“Like the marijuana?” I asked.

“Yep.”

“Clay knows the rules. And so do you.”

Zachary hooked his thumbs through the front belt loops of his jeans. “Miss City Girl. You’re standing in Dog Holler. Rules here ain’t the same.”

I put my hand in my coat pocket and touched my fingers to my keys. "My rules are my rules. You need to make certain that you and Clay get to school tomorrow."

Zachary chewed the corner of his mouth. "Might."

"'Might' isn't enough. I want you there." I turned and headed down the incline, across the yard, down the lane. I climbed into my car, slammed the door, made a U-turn in the dirt road, and headed back the way I came.

The next morning, I pulled into the lot and spotted Zachary standing at the far end of the school, wearing a baggy army jacket, his back against the brick. I parked in my usual spot and climbed from my car. The breeze smelled of fall, and across the valley, mist hovered above the pines. I started toward Zachary, counting my steps, the gravel sharp beneath my boots. When I reached him, he glared, then said, "Don't say nothing. Clay's around the side."

I hoisted my backpack over my shoulder. "Good."

"Good," Zachary said, pitching his voice like mine. He shook his head. "I swear to God, lady, you been staring at a whole room of bad. Bad and crazy. And for some reason, you keep on, like you don't know no better."

"Maybe I don't," I said.

Zachary shrugged. "A girl like you coming Dog Holler way ain't hardly good sense. Might be a lunatic in the woods. Waiting for a skinny schoolteacher to poke her nose where it don't belong."

"Maybe the teacher expects her students to be in school," I said. "Besides, I don't walk in the woods of Dog Holler. I only walk the lanes."

Zachary pushed away from the wall. "Lanes or woods, don't matter. Folks my way shoot first, talk later. And I don't need me no dead schoolteacher."

Late afternoon, the sun broke through the clouds, and from our window, the distant trees were ablaze with color, the gold and rust and red, bright against the hills. We finished our work and headed outside, the wind blowing through the high grass as we walked toward the pond, and once we were out of sight of the windows, I called, "Go," and the kids broke into a run and scattered about the field, their legs fast, racing to and from the wire fence that bordered the schoolyard, their voices carrying on the wind.

Slade and I walked together, his long arms swinging at his sides, the sleeves of his tattered windbreaker pushed to his elbows. "Hard getting me a job," he said, "if'n I can't read."

"I thought we'd start with Mr. Poe," I said. "He's a good man. He told me that you could ride with him on Thursdays, down to Murray for the government surplus. The two of you would load the food, and when you got back to the school, you'd unload, and if you do well, Mr. Poe said he'd start showing you what he does around the school. Sweeping, mopping, shoveling snow. Would you like the work?"

Slade nodded. "Missing me some schooling. You mind?"

"No, of course not," I said. "It's a wonderful opportunity."

When we neared the pond, Slade scooped a rock from the ground, bent his arm, stepped up to the water's edge and sent the rock sailing, skipping the surface, ripples rolling outward, and then fading until the surface was smooth again. He glanced at me. "My old lady done sending Dorcy off to have her baby. To people Dorcy don't know."

Slade scooped another rock. I watched as his arm reached out over the water. Watched the ripples. Watched them disappear. "Then what?" I asked.

"Comes back."

"And the baby?"

"The baby done come, too. Ain't nothing to do, but raise it up," he said. "And Dorcy's a mind to call the baby Wayland. Fix the sorry son of a bitch for messing her up." Slade yanked a blade of grass from the ground, stuck it in his mouth and chewed one end. "I done told her, Wayland ain't no name for nobody, and luck on her side, she have herself a girl baby. And come up with a pretty name."

Far off in the field, my other kids trailed Dugan and Clay and Zachary to the ball diamond, Clay's voice carrying above the others. I squatted at the edge of the pond and touched my fingers to the cold water. Slade squatted beside me, then handed me a rock. "Give a try?"

I glanced at the rock in my hand. Flecks of red splattered the gray. I stared out over the pond, then smiled at Slade.

"Get yourself up then," he said, and we both stood. He bent his arm. "Like this here, Miss. Like me." And I bent my arm. And once more, Slade stepped up to the pond and threw his rock, and it skittered across the water, sending ripple after ripple, and then he nodded in my direction, and waited for me to step up and take my turn.