

a novel

the

words

between

us

erin

bartels

“*The Words between Us* is a story to savor and share: a lyrical novel about the power of language and the search for salvation. A secondhand bookstore owner hiding from a legacy of scandal, tragedy, and heartbreak must unlock the secrets of the past to claim her happiness. I loved every sentence, every word.”

Barbara Claypole White, bestselling author of *The Perfect Son* and *The Promise between Us*

“Erin Bartels has done it again. She’s created a story that has set up camp in my mind and now feels more like a memory, something I lived, than a piece of fiction. The added benefit is that it’s a story about books, some of the best ones ever written. If you are the kind of person who finds meaning and life in the written word, then you’ll find yourself hidden among these pages.”

Shawn Smucker, author of *Light from Distant Stars*

“Vividly drawn and told in expertly woven dual timelines, *The Words between Us* is a story about a woman who has spent years trying to escape her family’s scandals and the resilience she develops along the way. Erin Bartels’s characters are a treat: complex, dynamic, and so lifelike I half expected them to climb straight out of the pages.”

Kathleen Barber, author of *Are You Sleeping*

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Books by Erin Bartels

We Hope for Better Things

The Words between Us

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

*For Zach
who has even more books than I do*

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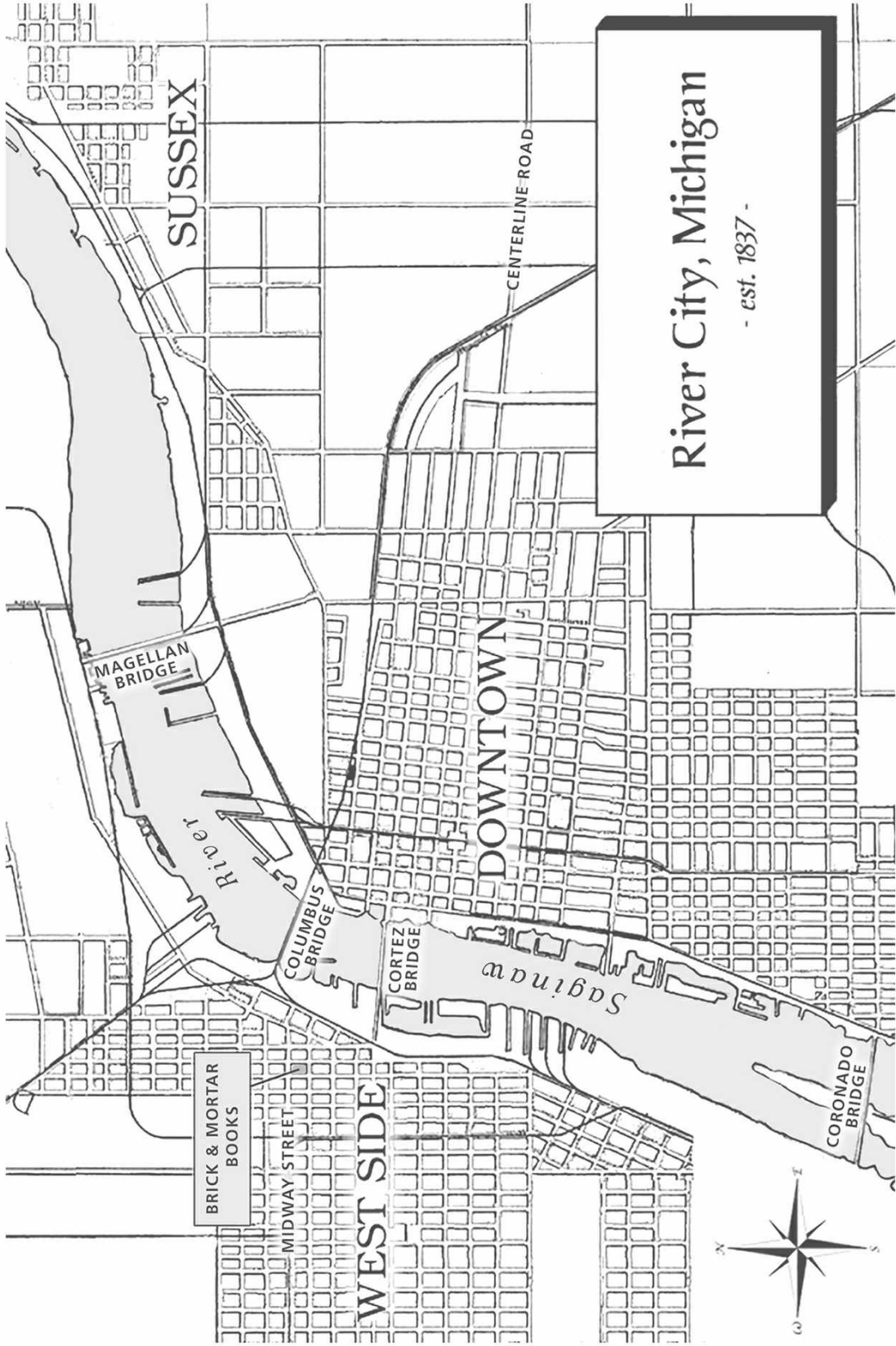
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River City, Michigan
- est. 1837 -

BRICK & MORTAR
BOOKS



Second hand books are wild books, homeless books.

—Virginia Woolf

1

now

Most people only die once. But my father is not most people. He is a monster.

He first died on a Wednesday in November 2001, when his sentence was handed down—*We the members of the jury find Norman Windsor, on three counts of murder in the first degree, guilty; on the charge of extortion, guilty; on the charge of obstruction of justice, guilty; on the charge of conspiring with enemies of the United States of America, guilty.* And on and on it went. Or so I imagine. I wasn't there. The teenage daughters of the condemned generally are not present at such events.

Now, nearly eighteen years later, he will be executed. It's the first thought I can separate from my dreams this morning, though I've tried for weeks as the date approached to ignore it.

I dress quickly in yesterday's clothes without turning on the news. I don't want to see the mob hoisting signs, the guards standing stone-faced at the prison entrance, interviews with grim relatives of the dead. All I want is for this day to be over, for that part of my life to be over. So I shut the past in behind the door, descend the creaking stairs, and emerge as always in the back room of Brick & Mortar Books, where my real family resides in black text upon yellowed pages, always ready to pick up our conversation where we last left off.

"Good morning, Professor." The African Grey parrot offers his familiar crackly greeting.

"Good morning, Professor." I open the cage door, wondering not for the first time who is imitating whom.

The Professor climbs onto the perch above the cage and produces the sound of a crowd cheering. I change his paper, refresh his water, and give him a terrible used pulp paperback to shred into ribbons. Every morning is the same, and there's comfort in that. Even today.

I know the store will be dead—even more so than usual—but I can't afford to stay closed, even if it is the day after Saint Patrick's Day in River City, Michigan. I have never understood why the feast day of an Irish saint is so popular here, as nearly all the Catholics who settled in the area have unpronounceable surnames that end in *ski*. Maybe they all just need a big party to forget the misery of March for a day. Even the Lutheran church three blocks south canceled services so its members could walk in the parade. And many of those same people who painted their faces green and donned blinking four-leaf clover antennae as they marched down Centerline Road instead of going to church were on this side of the river later that night, guzzling green beer and kissing plenty of people who aren't actually Irish, despite T-shirts asserting ancestry to the contrary.

Of all the storefronts on this section of Midway Street, there are only five that do not serve alcohol: a pet salon, a custom lighting store, a bank, an aromatherapy shop, and my bookstore. Every other business along this quarter-mile spur of Midway is a bar, making it the destination of choice for about half the sleepy city on any given weekend and about eighty percent on Saint Patrick's Day. Not that the high traffic translates into high sales for me. They stay in the bars. I stay with my books.

Armed with more than a few years of experience with the aftermath of Saint Paddy's, I pull on a pair of bright yellow rubber gloves—*Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, Exhibit A: the gloves Mr. Windsor wore when carrying out the strangulation of Mr. Lambert*—and head toward the front door with a triple-thick garbage bag and a broom. But there's another matter to attend to before I can clean up all the trash.

I knock on the glass near the ear of a woman who is slumped against the door. "Hey!"
She doesn't move.

Back through the store, through the maze of boxes in the back room, through the metal receiving door out to the alley. A stiff breeze whips up a torn paper shamrock chain, along with the stench of beer and vomit. I hug the east wall of the store, passing beneath the pockmarked remains of a mural of a billowing American flag. I stop. There, on the very lowest white stripe, a profane word is scrawled in black spray paint. I add the removal of the word to my mental checklist and keep walking.

The wind hits me hard as I turn onto Midway. Long shadows cast by light posts in the rising sun point toward the spire of St. Germain Catholic Church, just visible over the tops of the still bare trees, and graze the edge of the woman's coat. She is curled up tight, as if she were developing inside an egg. Glittery green shoes poke out beneath her black parka. Her bottle-blond hair, streaked with green dye, was probably stunning last night. Now it is matted down around her face. I poke her with my broom. She shrinks a little further into her egg.

"Hey, wake up!"

Slender fingers push back the bird's nest of hair. One brown eye squints up at me. "Hey, Robin. There you are."

Sarah Kukla is as slim as she was in high school, but as I hoist her to her sparkly feet she weighs three hundred pounds.

"I was knocking. You never answered."

Her breath almost makes me drop her back onto the pavement.

"I can't hear knocking at this door when I'm upstairs. You should have called."

Leaning her body against mine, I manage to open the front door and dump her into a threadbare armchair. Her parka falls open, revealing black fishnets under an impossibly short green dress that looks like it was sprayed onto her body. Her cheeks and nose glow red. Her emerald eye shadow smudged with black eyeliner makes her look more like she had dressed for Halloween than Saint Paddy's.

"Where were you last night?" I ask.

"Everywhere," she moans.

"Come on. I'll take you upstairs. You can wash up and get some coffee."

Even a massive hangover cannot hide Sarah's surprise at this offer. In my seven years at 1433 Midway I've never invited her or anyone else up. But I can't send her back home to her son like this. Anyway, I do have a human decency clause in my unwritten personal privacy policy. I'm not a monster.

"Let me get The Professor back in his cage. If I'm not around for too long he chews up good books."

The parrot is not impressed by this break in his routine and lets me know with a sharp bite on my thumb. I don't grudge him his irritation. I kind of wish I could simply bite Sarah's thumb and send her on her way. But I tell myself once more that it's probably not her fault she is the way she is and I should have some compassion.

Somehow we make it up the steep staircase and into my apartment, where she looks around with an expression that grows ever more disappointed. “It’s so plain.”

“What were you expecting?”

“I dunno. It used to be more—” She looks away. “Never mind.”

She slouches onto the couch, kicks off her shoes, and pulls a fleece blanket over her head. I don’t know what this place looked like when she spent all her time here, before it was a bookstore, before I came back to town. But I know from the snores drifting back to the kitchen that I can’t ask her now. I don’t have the heart to wake her when the coffee is done, so I creep back downstairs to gather in the remains of last night.

Each new gust of wind brings me more confetti and cigarette butts skidding along the concrete like staggering drunken partiers. I tuck it all into the trash bag along with broken glass, wadded-up tissues, and a single black shoe. I’ll have to do it again in a few hours when the wind brings more. It doesn’t bother me like it used to. It’s just part of the rhythm of this place.

A sharp beeping ceases, one of those sounds you don’t notice until it’s gone. In the silence left behind I realize that the ice on the river has finally melted. I know it without looking. Rivers have voices, and this morning the Saginaw is grumbling.

At the end of the street, a tow truck ascends the boat launch at Marina Five, dragging the rusty blue pickup I saw still parked on the thinning ice yesterday. The last of the ice fishermen leans toward the truck, hand at his heart, as one might hover over a dead body to search for one more breath, one more twitch of the eyelids, something that might indicate that there was still time to tell him you loved him. Only there wasn’t.

No, he’s just getting a pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket.

I watch until all that’s left of the story is wet gravel. Next year it might be a Jeep or an ice shanty. It will probably be in February rather than March—winter had lingered so long this year. But it wouldn’t be nothing. This too is part of the routine—when the ice gives way, when what was solid ground suddenly cracks and shifts and turns deadly.

There had been a tow truck in my father’s case, pulling a black sedan from a different river—*May I direct your attention to Exhibit B?* It was anything but routine. I saw it splashed across the front page of the *Boston Globe*, read the gruesome details in neat columns of text that left leaden dust beneath my fingernails. I didn’t go to school the next day.

When I can’t fit even one more stray sequin into the bag, I tie the plastic handles and stretch my back. That’s when I see it, in a skeletal crab apple tree on the other side of the street—the first robin. Spring. All signs point to it. A winter, no matter how long, cannot last forever. The longed-for bird tips his head at me and lifts off against the wind. I deposit the trash in the alley dumpster, fish out my scrub brush and graffiti remover—it’s not the first time—and get to work on the wall.

Half an hour later I turn on the lights and let The Professor back out of his cage. Ignoring his muttered cursing, I flip the Open sign and settle down behind the cash register with a hundred-year-old copy of *Aurora Leigh* as company.

The spine crackles and the sweet perfume of time drifts up to my nose. The lines slip under my eyes like a mother duck and her brood slipping down the river. Word by word, Aurora lives and loves as she first did under Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s graceful pen.

Three quiet hours later—not even a visit from Mr. Sutton, the only person I could call a regular customer with any integrity—the bells on the front door jingle. The Professor squawks, “Hello!”

“I got the mail,” comes Dawt Pi’s heavily accented voice as she rounds a shelf. “I thought you were going to put that sign out.”

She tucks her tiny purse under the counter before reaching up for The Professor. The bird edges over and makes his way down her arm to her shoulder. He’ll spend the next half hour carefully preening her straight, oil-black hair. He never does this to me. If he sat for more than a couple minutes on my shoulder, I would probably end up missing half my ear.

“What sign?”

“That sign. You said you were going to put it out. On the sidewalk.”

I put down my book. “Sorry. I was a little distracted this morning.”

“I will get it.” She retrieves a chalkboard easel nearly as tall as she is and a box of colored chalk from the back room. “You want me to do it?”

I know she is still not confident about the peculiar spellings of her adopted country’s language, so I love her for offering. “I can do it. What did we decide?”

“Hardcover one dollar, paperback fifty cents.”

I sigh. We will lose money. Still, I kneel at the easel to write out the words I hope will draw people into my beloved store. The past few years have been tough, but I’m determined to weather the storm.

“You want to look at this mail? There’s a package for you.”

I stand and tear open the large, padded manila envelope Dawt Pi slid across the counter to me. It’s obviously a book. I carefully unwrap the brown paper from around it to reveal a vivid red and white dust jacket adorned with a stylized carousel horse beneath a bold yellow title.

“Oh my.”

“What is it?”

I can hardly breathe when I see the copyright page. “Oh my.”

“What?”

“It’s a first printing, first edition *Catcher in the Rye*.”

“Is that good?”

I shouldn’t expect a recent refugee from Myanmar to know better, but I give her an incredulous look all the same. “This could be worth a lot.” I flip over the envelope. No name, just a return address in California. “Why would someone just send this to me?” Starting at the back of the book, I flip through the pages. “Oh no.”

“What?”

“There’s underlining. That’ll affect the value. Though it’s in pencil, so we could . . .”

The moment I see the coffee-ring stain on page twenty-three, I drop the book on the counter.

“What?” Dawt Pi’s now exasperated voice cuts through the fog that is swiftly gathering in my mind.

The bird on her shoulder voices his own question. “What does our survey say?”

But I can only manage one word in response.

“Peter.”

2

then

Death has always captivated me. My dead goldfish, one fin breaking through the surface, as though he had discovered he couldn't breathe underwater and was reaching out for someone to save him. The dead bird beneath my bedroom window, her last moment imprinted on the glass for months. The rubbery frog splayed on the board in my eighth-grade science classroom, his little hands and feet and skin pinned down so he couldn't stop my prodding. Always a body, but with something missing, something twisted out of order. It was that off bit that made me wonder. What was really missing other than breath? Because it wasn't just that. I could hook that frog up to a machine that would pump little poofs of air into his tiny lungs, but he wouldn't really be living. It was something else.

I wondered about this as I scuffed through the cemetery in my new backyard. Below my feet lay dozens of bodies, just missing one vital thing. Beyond the cemetery, perhaps a hundred yards off the road, stood a dead house. It wasn't just empty; it was dead. It was missing that same thing the fish and the bird and the frog and all these people were missing. But what it was exactly, I couldn't say.

My new home was closer to the road: a trailer occupied by a lumpy old woman I just had to trust was really my grandmother, and a parrot that glared at me whenever I dared come out of my cramped room.

"Does it talk?" I had asked when I arrived a week earlier.

"Sure does. If he has something to say."

But the bird, whom "Grandma" rather grandly called The Professor—you could hear the capital *T* in *The*—didn't talk to me. Instead he growled if I got within two feet of the cage, which I had to do in order to go anywhere because the cage was enormous and the trailer was not. So I retreated outside, bound by Grandma's three unbending rules: "Don't sit on the tombstones, don't fall in the ditch, and don't go playing in that old house. It's condemned."

The land that the trailer, the cemetery, and the dead house occupied was practically the only acre of untilled land in sight, a small ship in a sea of corn and sugar beets. I'd only been in Sussex, Michigan, for six days, but for a precocious fourteen-year-old girl from Amherst, Massachusetts, it had already been too long. Despite its tony name, which I figured would promise a certain level of sophistication or at least charm, Sussex appeared to be little more than a provincial suburb of the equally unremarkable River City to the immediate west. The streets back in Amherst were lined with ancient oaks, grand old homes, and venerable university buildings. The streets of Sussex were lined with ditches, a primitive drainage strategy in a place that wanted to be what it really was—a swamp. The grandest house I'd seen so far was the one decomposing just twenty or thirty yards beyond the headstones. Not one part of this town felt alive. How could my mother have grown up here?

With nothing else to do, I wove through the gravestones and attempted to pronounce the names I read. Andrzejewski. Wiczorkowski. Mikolajczak. I picked at the long grass around the stones that needed trimming and wished I had a book. But Grandma apparently didn't believe in

them. The only things to be found in the trailer resembling books were the worn and curled *TV Guides* piled in a prickly, half-unraveled basket on the coffee table. Eventually, bored nearly to my own death, I leaned back against a tree, fell asleep in the heavy summer air, and dreamt that I lived in a ditch, which wasn't far from reality.

The sound of a car door awakened me. I watched a teenage boy walk twenty paces and kneel in front of a slab of shiny black granite. His mouth began to move like he was praying, but he kept his eyes open. He talked to the stone for a minute, then pulled a thick hardcover book from a backpack and placed it on the ground. He stood up and our eyes met across the rows of the dead.

He waved. "Hey."

"Hey," I returned.

He examined me with confident blue eyes set in a summer-tanned face. I could tell immediately that he was popular. And I was sure he could tell that I would not be.

He glanced around a moment. "What are you doing way out here?"

"Just taking a walk." I tried to approximate his accent, contracting my round New England vowels and stringing the words together like the pearls on my mother's favorite necklace. *Jus taykin awok*.

He raised his eyebrows and indicated the trailer by the road. "Do you live there?"

"I rode my bike." I indicated a vague area behind me where I'd parked my nonexistent bike. "Who died? Your grandma?" I made "your" into "yer" and dropped the "nd" in "grandma." I thought it sounded pretty authentic.

"My mom."

"Oh." I stopped thinking about accents. "Sorry."

He furrowed his brow. "Where are you from?"

"Out east. Just moved here."

"You going to Kennedy?"

"What's that?"

He laughed. "The high school."

"Oh, yeah. I guess so."

"I'll see you around then." He started off.

"What did she die of?"

He turned back to face me. "Aneurysm."

"Do you come talk to her often?"

He smiled slightly. "Today's her first birthday since she died. I had to get out of the house. My dad's not handling it real well."

I nodded. "What's it like? To lose a parent?"

The little smile melted away. "What do you think? It's the worst. Listen, I gotta go. I have football practice. It's hell week. Catch you around."

When he was gone, I knelt in front of the gravestone he'd been talking to. *Emily Rose Flynt. Born August 20, 1954. Died December 10, 1999. Beloved wife and mother.* On the browning grass lay the book *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Strange. What were the chances that this particular book should find its way to me?

I opened the cover, releasing the sweet scent of old paper, then flipped through the pages, stopping here and there to read the strange and beautiful words. Of course a football player would leave something like this on the ground, little considering that the words hidden within might actually matter to some people, that perhaps it should not be left exposed to the elements.

So of course I had to take it.



The next day Grandma got my mom's old bike out of the shed behind her trailer. Now it would be mine—likely the only thing of hers I would ever own. The tires were bald but held enough air for me to attempt the terrifying ditch-lined roads into the village of Sussex. I coasted down each bland street in town until I found Kennedy High School. Shouts, grunts, and whistles drifting on the humid air led me to the football field, where twenty or thirty guys were smashing into tackling dummies on the only green grass in sight.

I climbed to the top of the metal bleachers—the highest point in the county, I was sure—and surveyed the landscape. Boring little houses lined up neatly on parallel streets to the west, nothing but farms to the east. The football field was the dividing point, the last outpost of civilization before a vast wilderness of corn and sky.

In the midst of all the identical practice jerseys below, I thought I spotted the guy with the dead mom. The height and build were right, and the tufts of sandy brown hair poking out beneath the helmet. He moved like he knew where he was going. When the helmets came off twenty minutes later, I saw I was right. I descended the stands as the coach barked that there was only one more practice until school started and they had better get ready for the real work come next week. The huddle broke up. Most of the players dragged their feet back toward the locker rooms, dog-tired in the thick late summer heat. Then one red jersey broke from the pack and veered in my direction at a trot.

“Hey.” He ran his fingers through his sweat-slicked hair and then hooked them on the chain-link fence between us. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to check out the school.”

“Yeah? What do you think?”

“It's all right, I guess.” I glanced back at the low-slung, featureless brick building. “It's pretty . . . sixties.”

“It was built in the sixties. What did your old school look like?”

“Like an *old school*. Like a school should look.”

He laughed.

“Is the football team any good?” I asked.

“Sometimes.”

“Are you any good?”

“Always.”

A cocky grin, so much like my father's. He started toward the school. I followed, walking my mother's old bike along the other side of the fence.

“I'm Peter Flynt.”

“Robin. Dickinson.”

That was a lie. The first lie I would have to tell, but certainly not the last. Back when things started getting really bad, I had been advised by a social worker to take a new last name in order to avoid any association with my disgraced parents. It would make things easier on me. As if they could be easy. The social worker suggested my mom's maiden name. But Gray? Robin Gray? How boring. How utterly without backstory potential. Dickinson was far more suitable. I was from Amherst, after all.

A few weeks later I was given a packet containing my new identity. I practiced saying my new name in front of the mirror. It wasn't easy, and even if I said Dickinson, I still thought Windsor.

“Dickinson? Like the poet. My mom loved Dickinson.” He motioned to the school building hunching beyond the grass. “She was an English teacher here.”

I understood the book now. We reached the end of the fence and continued walking side by side, the bike and my lie now the only things between us.

Grandma lied too. To her friends at church, to her priest—well, maybe not to her priest, but he wasn’t allowed to tell other people her business anyway, so I was okay there. To her friends I was some shirttail relative—fourth cousin thrice removed, et cetera—who had fallen on hard times and moved in to help her around the house because she was getting old and decrepit. Maybe she wasn’t really decrepit, but she was awful crotchety. All these lies were okay because they were for my protection.

“You must have lots of books at your house,” I said.

“Tons. My dad put them all away in boxes, though. He can’t look at them. Reminds him of her. But I thought maybe I should read them all, to honor her. So I’m pulling them out of the basement and reading each one, even if I’ve read it before for English class.”

We reached a rusty metal door.

“You like to read?” he asked.

“Yeah. I had to leave all my books.”

“Why?”

I hesitated. I couldn’t tell him that practically everything in my house had either been commandeered as possible evidence or was to be sold off to help defray mounting court costs. Or that I had to be spirited out of Amherst under cover of darkness to this hick town only God knew about to prevent the media jackals from tracking me.

“I mean I had to leave my favorite library.”

“Hey, stay here. I’ll only be like ten minutes.”

He disappeared through the door without waiting to see if I would obey his command. But I did. I had nothing else to do. And I liked this guy. I leaned the bike up against the wall and examined the salmon-colored bricks. Like bricks of Spam. Tiny red mites hurried over the hot surface. Even they had a bit of that undefined something that would escape their little bodies if I smooshed them with my thumb, so I didn’t.

Eventually Peter appeared in the doorway in his own clothes and street shoes, duffel bag slung over one shoulder. He held a book with a bright red, white, and yellow cover. “You ever read this?”

I shook my head.

“It’s good.” He pushed it into my hands.

“What’s it about?”

“It’s about this kid who leaves his prep school and has a bunch of adventures in New York City all on his own even though he’s only like fifteen. And he eviscerates people along the way when he figures out they’re all pretending to be something they’re not. It’s great.”

Peter didn’t look like a guy who could pronounce the word *eviscerate*, let alone use it correctly in a sentence. But then, his mom had been an English teacher. The book sounded like something I should read. It sounded like the situation in which I found myself, adrift and alone with a pretty powerful desire to eviscerate certain duplicitous people. If only I was in New York City instead of Nowheresville, Michigan.

“Is there a library in Sussex?”

“There are a couple in River City. One on either side of the river. But you can read this copy.”

“But it’s your mom’s.”