

A NOVEL

Long After We Are Gone



“A big, beautiful, devastating, and ultimately hopeful novel.”

—**Erica Bauermeister**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *No Two Persons*

Terah Shelton Harris

AUTHOR OF *ONE SUMMER IN SAVANNAH*

ALSO BY TERAH SHELTON HARRIS

One Summer in Savannah

Long A NOVEL
After
We Are
Gone

Terah Shelton Harris



Copyright © 2024 by Terah Shelton Harris
Cover and internal design © 2024 by Sourcebooks
Cover illustration by Sandra Chiu
Internal map © Mackenzie Barber at For The Love Co.
Internal illustration by Ivan Burchak via Getty images

Sourcebooks and the colophon are registered trademarks of Sourcebooks.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems—except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews—without permission in writing from its publisher, Sourcebooks.

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious or are used fictitiously. Apart from well-known historical figures, any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.

All brand names and product names used in this book are trademarks, registered trademarks, or trade names of their respective holders. Sourcebooks is not associated with any product or vendor in this book.

Published by Sourcebooks Landmark, an imprint of Sourcebooks
P.O. Box 4410, Naperville, Illinois 60567-4410
(630) 961-3900
sourcebooks.com

Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file with the Library of Congress.

CONTENTS

[Front Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Map of The Kingdom](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Thirteen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Reading Group Guide](#)

[A Conversation with the Author](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

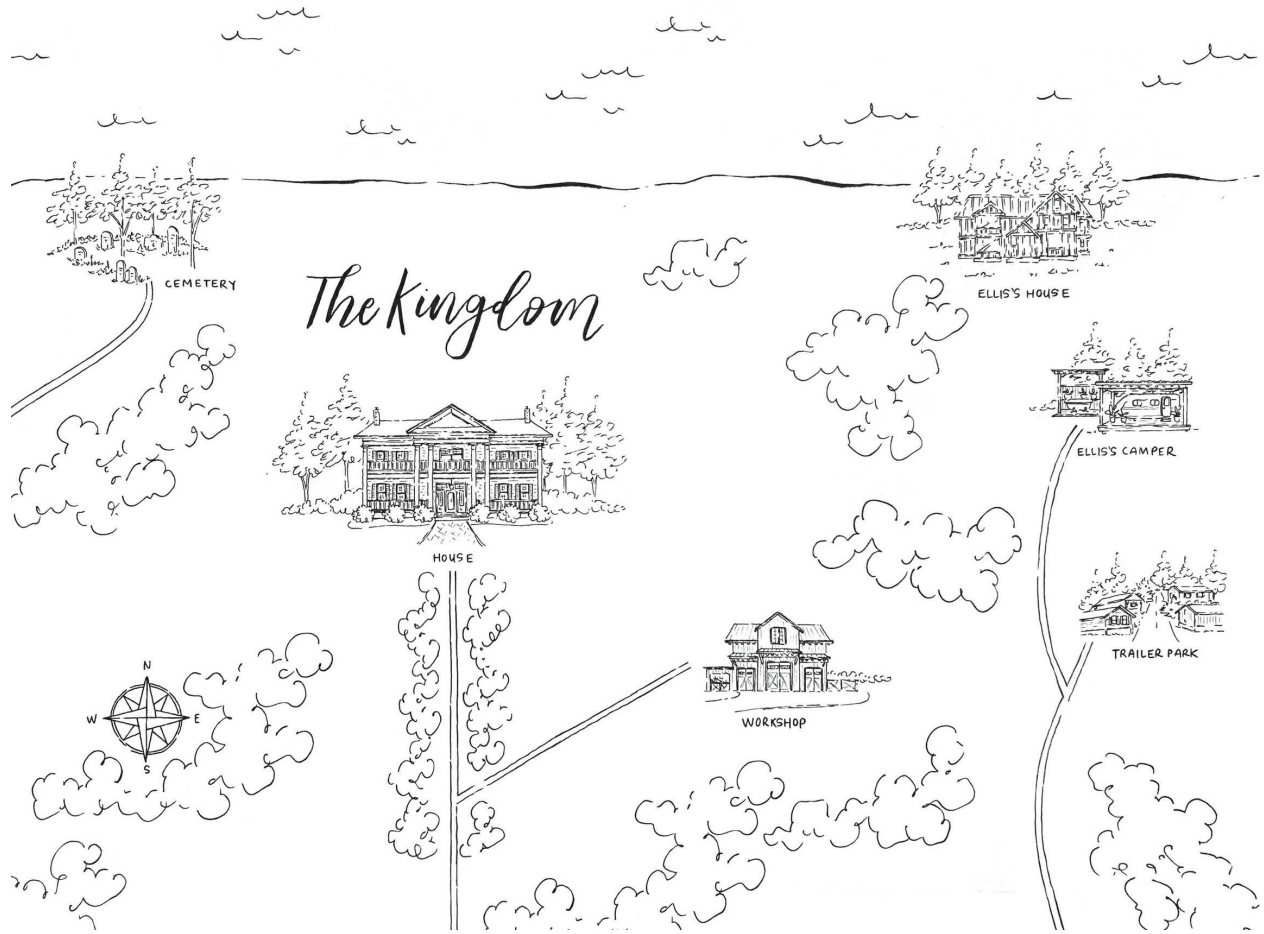
[About the Author](#)

[Back Cover](#)

*For Jamel
Bangkok has us now.*

“Men are haunted by the vastness of eternity. And so we ask ourselves: Will our actions echo across the centuries? Will strangers hear our names long after we are gone and wonder who we were, how bravely we fought, how fiercely we loved?”

—**Odysseus** (*Troy*)



AUTHOR'S NOTE

Long After We Are Gone tells the story of one family's fight to save their ancestral land, the Kingdom. This story is fictional. Diggs, North Carolina, does not exist. Well...not the one portrayed in *Long After We Are Gone*. There is a real Diggs, North Carolina, but the one you are about to read about is conjured from my imagination, and any coincidences to the real Diggs are accidental. Nor does the Kingdom exist. And yet there are (and have been) many Kingdoms now and throughout time, and the circumstances covered in *Long After We Are Gone* are very real.

After the Reconstruction, Black families began buying land in droves. Around the same time, laws were developed to dispossess Blacks of their land. In the case of the Solomon siblings and so many Black families now and then, the Kingdom was passed down without a will, making it heir property, a form of ownership in which descendants inherit an interest in the land, similar to holding stock in a company. Heir property does not constitute a clear title, which means the land is vulnerable to developers, corporations, and governments to use laws to acquire the land. Other methods, such as partition actions, eminent domain, and property tax sales, are also used to take land from landowners. Heir property is not eligible for federal loans, for private financing, or to be used as collateral. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has recognized heir property as the leading cause of Black involuntary land loss. It is estimated that between 1910 and 1997, Blacks lost about 90 percent of farmland worth billions of dollars.

Even today, the same Reconstruction-era laws and practices continue to dispossess Blacks of their land. In June 2022, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors voted to return ownership of prime California beachfront property, known as Bruce Beach, to descendants of Willa and Charles Bruce, who built a resort for African Americans but were stripped of the land in the 1920s. The Bruces suffered racial harassment from white neighbors, and in the 1920s, the Manhattan Beach City Council took the land through eminent domain. In North Carolina, brothers Melvin Davis and Licurtis Reels were jailed for eight years after refusing to leave the land their great-grandfather purchased a century ago. Lastly, at the time of this writing, officials in Gwinnett County, Georgia, have backed away from plans to use eminent domain to acquire the Promised Land, a one-hundred-acre property that has been in the Livsey family since the 1920s, following criticism and community outrage.

If you, your family, or someone you know, are the owners of heir property, I advise you to take the necessary steps to protect your land. This includes planning for the future by writing a will, keeping property taxes current, and talking to a lawyer about your options.

As much as *Long After We Are Gone* is about ancestral land, it's also about family and the secrets we keep, and the things we refuse to let go. All of the Solomon siblings harbor secrets, addictions, and other aspects that may be triggering for some. I feel very strongly about the use of trigger and content warnings and giving readers the option of stepping into the story or not. *Long After We Are Gone* contains instances of overeating, anxiety, the death of a parent(s), homophobia, sexual manipulation, and violence. We each bring a piece of our history into everything we read, and your comfort and mental health matters to me. If you find yourself in this story or identify with any of these topics, please feel free to step away if you need to. I want you to be safe. If you choose to stay, I assure you the handling of each of these topics was approached with the utmost care and consideration for the pain and discomfort they may cause others. At its core, *Long After We Are Gone* is a deep, heartfelt story about the power of family, and I hope that's reflected on the page.

With much love,
Terah Shelton Harris

ONE

Really, King Solomon died before his heart stopped beating. Two knife attacks, one wayward bullet, and a nasty two-story fall collected over his sixty-three years of life failed to do what a whisper could. As his body collapses to the ground, the widow-maker closing the one-two punch, he takes one final look at his beloved house—his father’s house, and his grandfather’s before—and thinks of his children. He whispers something, a final plea, before slipping away, out of his body, and into a calming dark that wraps him like a prayer.

His children—Junior, Mance, Cecily, and Tokey—don’t know yet. Across town from King, Tokey’s stomach growls as she approaches the McDonald’s drive thru line, the oatmeal and egg white omelet from her first breakfast, the “just for show” breakfast, consumed two hours before at home with her father, not enough. Six hundred miles away from Diggs, North Carolina, in New York City, Cecily agonizes over leaving her toothbrush at home, hoping that today, unlike other days, she won’t need it. And back on the family land, near where he will soon find his father’s body, Mance practices the sign language for *I love you* with his dry, calloused hands, his pinkie finger refusing to extend in a straight line, not even for his only son.

Five miles away, Junior, the oldest, blinks his eyes open to a new circumstance.

Junior has never seen Simon like this, his face bathed under the morning light streaming through the open window of the loft, his consciousness still caught within the dregs of sleep. He has lain next to him in the seconds after midnight and in the small hours of the morning before the sunlight reveals the truth. Until this morning, Simon belonged to the night.

But this? A delicious first.

“Good morning,” Simon says, his voice full of tenderness and sleep, as smooth as velvet, soft and warm. Junior wonders if his voice has always been this gentle, if he noticed it when they first met in his office three years ago or even last night, when Simon asked him back to his loft. Junior whispers his own good morning, himself only slightly above the surface of sleep, and leans into the touch of Simon’s hand, the proximity of their bodies, this new reality.

In those words, the start of a new day presents itself in the soft breeze rippling through Simon’s thin curtains, the stillness of the morning colliding with the occasional car horn or tire

rattling over a manhole cover, the scattered smells of breath, oil, and sunshine.

Simon's up now, his head resting on one hand, the fingers of his other hand traveling the lean breadth of Junior's back. A subtle but sure touch, giving and patient, practiced at not taking any more or giving any less than desired. Junior loves that connection. He possesses a unique understanding of touch. It's what drew Junior, twelve years ago, to the once most important person in his life. And now, it's driving him toward Simon.

"What were you dreaming about? You were shaking and mumbling something," Simon asks.

"I was?"

Junior never dreams. Dreams are for those who sleep. And he doesn't. Not consistently. He rests his eyes long enough to fuel his life of quiet defeat.

But the day before, she said yes. The day before, Simon said no. Different people, different answers, both leading to this bed, this moment. Because, finally, she knows.

And last night Junior blinked his eyes closed and sleep came for him, and the thoughts did not wake him. Somehow, impossibly, he slept.

"You seem to be battling in your dreams. Who are you fighting?" Simon asks.

A simple question with multiple answers, but only one that matters.

His father.

They share a name but not much else. The differences and distance between them vast, an ocean. Junior presented to the world a strange form of six foot one, all torso and limbs—still three inches shorter than his father, King, and brother, Mance—with a great mold of a nose and a friendly grin that belied his sober and studious personality, the opposite of his father. More than that, both obligations and beliefs drove them apart. Years of struggle find them at an impasse, and Junior here, on his own and ignorant of his own way. His own purpose.

"I'm a terrible sleeper. Sorry."

Simon moves closer to him, his hand now resting between Junior's shoulder blades. "Don't apologize. I'm sure this old bed didn't help. I could replace this mattress. Get some high-thread-count sheets for you by tonight."

Tonight. The word shocks and thrills him.

Tonight. A moment in the future.

Junior had never considered if he would come back. He knew now that he would come, *could* come back. He had permission. He could wake here another morning and another morning. Plan to meet again, not just a chance opportunity like the others. They could relive last night. Or leave the night unwritten and undefined, at the whim of surprise. They had time.

Usually, Junior doesn't think of yesterdays or tomorrows. Like his students, he lives in the present, what's in front of him, the here and now. But for the first time, the arrangement feels real. The thought of tonight, a type of tomorrow, fills his chest with hope. Opportunities like this do not last days or weeks but fleeting seconds that you can't touch. He wants to live in a future

that does not yet exist.

This is what he wants.

And yet.

Junior turns over, feels Simon's hand travel along with him to now rest on his chest, looks at the ceiling and sees too many people there, staring down at him. Last night he felt as if he could power a city with his happiness, but now, slowly, like a shadow, a darkness creeps over him. When he finally drags his face back to Simon, his eyes stripped of brightness and optimism, the outer man, the one Junior folded inside last night, is back.

Simon stares at him, brow furrowed behind his glasses, and Junior retreats with his whole body. Even in this short period, Simon can distinguish the two men inhabiting Junior's body.

"You've put your armor back on," Simon finally says. The same armor Simon so carefully stripped from him last night and other nights before this, when Junior allowed the inner man an audience, when the outer man lowered his sword and shield and surrendered to a force greater than him.

But it isn't armor. Warriors donned armor. Armor could be removed, discarded, forgotten. Plus, Junior can never fully shed what he wears on the inside. He definitely isn't a warrior. That implies the sureness of a fighting spirit, empowerment, courage. His father embodies that. Mance, too. Not him.

Junior softens under the bone-deep sadness pressing down on him like a hand to the chest and strokes a thumb along Simon's cheek, now an arm's length away. "You know how to strip it from me again." He tries to muster a smile to conjure the inner man, once again, and feels himself falling short.

"For a night, yes. Forever, no, I fear."

Junior takes a deep breath and withdraws his hand, trying to imagine a world where forever was possible. "I've told you. I'm a complicated man."

That's the easiest answer he can give. The rest is harder to say. Better in small doses.

"Aren't we all? What are we but what we add and subtract from ourselves? We are not simple creatures," Simon says with a frame of impatience around the words.

"You speak such poetry to me," Junior says. "Even when I don't deserve it."

This is one of the things Junior loves about Simon, his ability to reach below the surface and see the heart of people, the good in them, even him.

But the truth is as simple as it is to swallow.

"I have to go."

Junior moves out of bed and slips on his pants and shirt. He can reconcile later what to do. Just not here. Not now. Simon follows, silent in the seconds it takes for both to dress, to reverse the placement of their clothes from the floor back onto their bodies after having torn them from each other last night.

"I'm sorry," Junior says once he's reached the front door.

“I know,” Simon says, not asking what for, but knowing what for, and presses his hand to Junior’s sternum. “I know.”

Simon could keep him here, with this simple gesture, for another hour. But Junior will not stay, *cannot* stay, that much he knows.

And yet, Junior doesn’t move. He stays braced in the warmth of Simon’s hand, each waiting for the other to sever the connection, for the end of their magical night.

Junior touches the door handle suddenly, needing to feel something cold and real. Because Simon, last night, all of this, doesn’t exist for him, the outer man. Those memories belong to someone else. That inner man treasures his freedom—his life outside of Junior. And Junior long ago set up, and respects, what belongs to the inner man versus what belongs to him.

He’s still trying to think of what to do, what to say to prolong the old familiar fear of absence when Simon’s hand grips a handful of his shirt and pulls him close, kissing him.

The kiss electrifies and terrifies him for various reasons as images from his world collide in him. It’s not enough to make him stay, but enough to make him return.

As they pull back, Junior feels his balance tilt, his vision pitching.

The first drop of blood splatters on the floor between them, followed by more.

Then, a knock on the door.

There’s nothing strange about a nosebleed or a knock at the door. But there’s something odd about the sequence of events. Junior knows that Simon knows who is there, knows before he opens the door to a woman he’s never seen before, knows even without processing what he’s opening them all to.

The woman is wearing casual weekend attire: black leggings, a denim shirt knotted at the waist, and a pair of white Converse. Her makeup is subdued, her hair pulled into a high ponytail that accentuates her small forehead with not one strand out of place.

“I need to talk with Junior.”

Simon’s eyes dart to Junior, hidden from view behind the door, then back at the woman. “Yes,” Simon says, stretching the word like a rubber band. “And you are?” he asks, though he doesn’t need to.

“Genesis. His wife.”

Her expression tells the story of her true feelings; the pain behind her eyes does not. Bright and searching, they sweep the length of Simon, taking in his finely muscled arms, the tuft of chest hair peeking out of his tank top, his bare feet flat on the wood floor, before her mouth opens just a crack.

Her words hang between them. No surprise or anger. From either of them. Simon’s expression is devoid of emotion, full of stillness. A kind of vacancy reserved with practice.

Simon opens the door wide to reveal Junior on the other side of it, his chin jutting upward, hand cupped to catch the blood.

“He shouldn’t tilt his head back. He gets sick if he swallows too much blood.” Genesis

opens her oversized purse and retrieves a tiny spray bottle and a handkerchief.

Simon murmurs something incoherent before saying, “I didn’t know.”

“If I’m going to let him come here, you should at least know how to stop these.”

Junior doesn’t look at Simon. It will hurt too much, watching his two worlds collide. Instead, he disappears into himself, a coping tactic he learned as a child when King scolded him for not handing him the right tool or during these random nosebleeds or any time when a moment became bigger than him. He allows himself to be led to a nearby chair and closes his eyes, making it all disappear, the scene in front of him, the thoughts, the memories. He allows Genesis to guide his hand to pinch his nose as she presses the handkerchief above his lip. These are practiced moves, a choreographed dance they have been perfecting for almost a decade.

“What can I do?” Simon asks.

“Why is his nose bleeding?” Genesis snaps. “He gets these when he’s stressed or when his blood pressure is high. You should know that. What’s wrong with him?”

Junior stops pinching his nose and says, “I’m fine.”

“Keep pinching. You know you have to hold that for at least ten minutes, or it’ll be a true bloodbath in here.” She turns her attention back to Simon and crosses her arms, once again appraising him. “I take it that you’re Simon.”

A question without a question mark.

“I am.”

This time Junior allows himself to look at Simon. This moment, he wants to capture, to remember. The moment he lost him. The moment he got close to the heat of happiness and then got scorched by it.

“So he knows, then?”

Simon’s forehead knits. “Knows what?”

Genesis falls silent for a moment, then whispers, not to Simon or Junior but to herself, “He doesn’t know.” She turns to Junior, kneeling. “You don’t know.”

“Know what?”

She softens as she reaches out and moves Junior’s hand from his nose, taking the bloody handkerchief into her hand. Her silence cracks, and the words spill out.

“Your father is dead.”



In New York, CeCe, the oldest daughter and third born, has just remembered that she left her toothbrush at home, her first thought as she softly rapped on Mark’s door. A strange thought perhaps, hours after breakfast and hours before lunch, but important; she hated a bitter, salty mouth, the taste of old pennies grasping her tongue. Maybe today, unlike others, he wouldn’t require it.

Mark, a junior partner at her law firm, waves her in without looking at her, his focus zeroed

in on the paperwork in front of him, his shoulders hunched up around his ears. CeCe does a visual sweep of his office, cataloging the familiar space: his large redwood desk, the matching bookcase behind him, which houses volumes of law books, the miniature Eiffel Tower, and framed pictures of his wife and two daughters.

“Ken is asking about the Warren file,” CeCe says, leaning over his desk, her long black hair curtaining in front of her, her hands clutching the edge of the redwood. “I trust that you’re going to keep your word.”

She hates the way her words sound to her, like a question, weak. Of all the faces and personalities she wears, and there are many, Mark likes and reacts to the submissive ones. This coquettishness is for his benefit. And hers.

When he finally looks up at her, it’s not to her amber eyes but first to her cleavage, directly at his eyeline. Her intent when she selected his favorite red V-neck sheath dress this morning, which curved her hips and plumped her breasts together, spilling them over the top.

When he finally meets her eyes, his eyebrow raises, and something passes between them, an understanding, before he stands and walks to the door, closing it, the lock clicking a second later.

CeCe knows what will come next, though she doesn’t know exactly how. It’s what always comes—since Mark discovered her secret three months ago, when she got sloppy. She could almost hear her father now, his thunderous voice, because that was his word throughout her youth: if she learned nothing else from him, learn this, he’d say, *don’t get sloppy*. Not in love, not in business. But she did. In both cases. And now there were consequences.

Mark’s scent reaches her before his fingers do, before he wraps his arm from behind her across her breasts and the other one around her stomach, before he buries his face in the crook of her neck and his hardness presses against her ass.

He slides his hands up her thighs, between her legs, and slips two fingers inside her. He moans at what he discovers.

“Fuck...you are so wet,” he says, his voice ragged.

His breath, his want quicken as he hastily loosens his belt, tugs down his pants, and pushes up CeCe’s dress. In one quick motion, he bends her over his desk, yanking her thong down as he plows into her. His penis is small and unimpressive, the smallest she’s ever seen; only the tip penetrates.

CeCe loves sex. But this is not sex. Though consensual, this is only a necessary transaction. And sex should never be necessary. It is purposeful, passionate—or so she once remembered. Once upon a time. But now, with Mark, it is necessary.

Mark pumps and bangs against her, a primal groan emanating from his throat in sync with his thrusts. CeCe makes no sound as he smashes her face against the desk, his whole hand pressing down on her head. He doesn’t notice, completely content on finishing his end of this transaction, eliciting his own pleasure. And when he does, seconds later, CeCe lifts herself from his desk, brushing away a paper clip embedded in her thigh.

She feels nothing. Definitely no inkling of pleasure between her legs. Nothing mentally either. No sadness. No disappointment. No shame. She doesn't turn and face him yet because, although she feels nothing, she's always been able to feel his pity.

She runs her thumb across the paper clip's imprint, a twisty emblem temporarily branding her skin, grateful that, like this imprint, this entire transaction would soon fade into memory like all of her indiscretions.

"So, you will continue to vouch that we worked together on the Warren file?" she says, clearing her throat, grateful that Mark chose this time to enact his portion of this quid pro quo between her legs and not in her mouth. She has a deposition later and couldn't imagine speaking without brushing her teeth.

"CeCe, look at me," he says, winded by his own effort. His belt buckle jingles, followed by a long zip. His voice fills the room, transforming the space back to a respectable place, where couples finalize their wills and start trust funds for their children.

She can already hear the shame in his voice, the regret. It punches a clock, arriving seconds after the room stops spinning, and the handkerchief he uses to clean himself disappears into his briefcase to be washed, probably by his unsuspecting wife of eight years.

When she finally turns, she sees his forehead scored with beads of sweat and something else. Something she's never seen before. Sympathy.

"How long do you think you can get away with this?"

"With what?" CeCe asks, sliding her black lace thong up and arranging her dress. Her question is technically risky, a dare she can't resist issuing herself, but it won't arouse his suspicion. There have been so many *whats*. Other cases. He only knows about one.

"You know what."

"It's fine. I just need some time to get the money and put it back."

"Let me help you."

Now there's no sympathy in his gaze. Back to pity. And also, sorrow.

The nerve.

Three months since she deposited a client's check into her personal account.

Three months since Mark learned what she did.

Three months since Mark pushed CeCe's head down to his penis for the first time.

Three months since he started sharing her lie and living within the prism of this unspoken deal.

He didn't offer to help three months ago.

It angers her, his weakness. Her father, King, blessed her with the gift of strength, of fight. A lesser emotion or response was cowardly. Mark is a coward.

CeCe wants to unleash her anger, push her frustration out on him, thrash against his chest.

And yet, she still needs him.

"Wouldn't you be liable for covering for me? For lying?" CeCe lightens her tone, careful not

to push him away before casting her gaze at the framed picture of his family cheesing in front of Magic Kingdom, a clear reminder, without words, of what he could lose, even if not legally—of the lengths she would go to keep her secret.

Mark follows CeCe's eyes to the picture, and his face pales.

"It doesn't have to come to that," CeCe says, her tone blending into an even softer one than before. "Don't you like this?" She runs her finger down his chest and her hand into his pants down to his cock, still damp and tacky. His pale face blushes as his head tilts toward the ceiling. He likes it, his appetite for her insatiable as he grows, once again, in her hand. CeCe loosens his belt as she sinks to her knees. "Let's just stick to the plan."

She will buy a toothbrush at lunch.

Ten minutes later, CeCe leaves Mark's office, raking her tongue against her teeth, wiping the corners of her mouth, her stomach roiling, when Victoria, the receptionist, waves for her attention.

"You have an urgent call from Junior."

"Tell him I'll call him back," CeCe says, not breaking her stride to the bathroom. She needs to get that taste out of her mouth and settle her stomach.

Victoria repeats CeCe's message into the phone and listens for a few seconds before saying, "He says it's about your father."

CeCe huffs and walks over to Victoria's desk, snatches the phone from her hand in one quick motion, and pretends not to notice Victoria's loud inhalation and crossed arms.

"I told him I would take a look at the papers when I had a chance. That land isn't going anywhere. He didn't need to have you call."

She expects Junior to dutifully resume his role as the eldest, as the defender of King and all that he commands, a role he happily performs, but meets the coldness of silence instead.

"CeCe...King is dead."

The phone slips out of CeCe's hand and hits the desk as she vomits. Sperm, coffee, and regret splash on the floor at her feet.



For Tokey, the start of the day is like any other.

"Welcome to McDonald's. May I take your order?"

Tokey twists her lips. She knows what she wants. It's what she always wants. What she always orders. But she doesn't want the perky-sounding cashier to judge her. She didn't drive past the closest McDonald's, where the staff knew her by name and her order by heart, to this one, on the outskirts of town and fifteen minutes from the school, to be judged.

So, she pauses for a menu-scanning beat before saying, "I'll have two sausage McGriddles with an extra sausage patty, five hash browns, and a large Coke with no ice."

Tokey pulls around to the first window to a cashier smiling toothily, her eyes as large and

round as the glasses she wears. Tokey matches her smile, practice for the many she would wear today. She wears smiles like clothes, tight and uncomfortable, never fitting. There's always something behind a smile, forced or not. She should know.

"The car ahead of you has already paid for your food," the girl says, her eyes beaming, waiting for a reaction.

Tokey has heard of this before, do-gooders paying for the food of others, but has never been part of such a transaction.

"Well...how much was their food?"

The perky cashier blinks twice and her smile teeters as she processes Tokey's question.

"\$4.02."

Probably a normal meal, a sausage egg biscuit with a large coffee. Or perhaps a bacon, egg, and cheese biscuit with a small orange juice. A normal, respectable breakfast with a normal number of calories.

"Would you...like to pay for the car behind you?" the cashier asks, her smile now lopsided.

"What about the car behind the car behind me?"

The laugh lines disappear, and she jabs a finger at the register.

"\$4.69."

"How much..."

The cashier sighs, interrupting, her enthusiasm completely diminished like a sneeze in the wind. "Ma'am...you are holding up the line."

"I'm sorry," Tokey says, embarrassed, reaching for her purse on the passenger's seat and rummaging past her makeup bag and journal until she unearths her wallet with an empty M&Ms wrapper stuck to it. "It's just that I feel so bad that someone had to pay so much for my food. I'll pay for two cars behind me." Tokey snatches the wrapper away and crushes it in her hand. "I'm buying breakfast for a coworker. She's running late and asked if I could pick up something for her. The things we do for our coworkers."

The cashier does not smile. Tokey ups the wattage on hers to make up for it.

Tokey doesn't believe the lie any more than she imagines the cashier does. As she pulls her debit card out of its holder, it slips from her fingers, falling between the seats.

"I'm sorry," Tokey says, maneuvering to retrieve it. All she sees is her own leg. There's not enough room. Her car has shrunk over the years. The steering wheel cuts into her thighs. As she unfastens the seat belt and turns, her breasts press against the steering wheel, honking the horn. She slides her fingers between the seat, feeling popcorn from last week's movie, Cheez-its from a quick run to the gas station, gummy bears she ate after work. She turns to the window. "I'm sorry."

And she is. Always. Sorry.

"Ma'am...it's okay." The cashier is exasperated. "Your food is already paid for. You can just pull up."

“No, I want to pay,” Tokey says, jamming her fingers once more between the crack until her fingertips graze the edge, and with one final shove, she grabs the card. “Here you go.”

The cashier inspects the card before taking it and slides it through the reader once, then again. She hands Tokey two receipts and her card.

“Thanks. You can pull up to the next window.”

“I’m sorry.”

Just as Tokey reaches the next window, another cashier opens the window and presents the large Coke and then a brown bag of food, the weight of it lacing a sharp pain to Tokey’s hand. She looks at it for a wound and notices the reddened skin.

Life is easier with food. She finds comfort in greasy bags handed out of windows and seeks answers in cakes wrapped in plastic, chasing a high that never lasts long. This meal will be one of six she’ll eat that day, and she wants no one to bear witness to her sins. At school, she pulls into her usual spot a good distance from the front door. There, she eats. Chewing her food, gulping her Coke, and swallowing what happened at McDonald’s with every bite. She chooses this spot even though she has difficulty walking, knowing that by the time she reaches her classroom, sweat stains will have flowered under her arms, the fabric across her chest will have darkened with the effort. By the time she’s finished eating, all those close parking spots will be filled, taken by those who don’t have to contemplate their steps, those whose pace is normal, those who are not hungry an hour later.

Tokey wads up her trash and tucks the bag under her seat. She’ll dispose of it later.

As she looks back up, she sees Junior hurrying toward her. As the principal of the school where she teaches, he’s often in and out of her day. But he’s not wearing his usual suit and tie. Her heart thuds when she sees the tears in his eyes.



How did the day begin? Before dawn, with Mance thinking it shouldn’t be difficult to say, “I love you,” to his only child. He looks at the fingers of his right hand and wills his pinkie straight, an impossible task. He has broken it twice and all the other fingers on that hand once. None of them stand erect and never will again. He stretches his left hand; a dislocated index finger and a quarter digit, along with three crooked ones, stare back at him. He doesn’t have the fingers for this.

Still early. Still night. And Mance can’t sleep.

He kneels in the muted field of green and yellow and pulls up a whisker of bristly weed, watching the way it sways in the breeze when he releases it. He sweeps his eyes over the vast landscape, taking it all in, the house and the land from the edge of the property, including the new secret stretch as well. Mostly, he listens. Listens to the moonlight stretching across the horizon. Listens to the day, close behind, yawning and waking up. Listens to the wind inhaling and exhaling a spring air on the cold side of perfect.