

ONE

MARIE COULD SEE THE FIRE up ahead through the trees. She could see sparks pull away from the flame and swirl up into the dark. It made her stomach tighten. She could see a hand shoot up, a shadow backlit by the flame, and she heard someone call out, long and slow, *Heeeee yeooow!* It was a yell full of the joy of being drunk on a Saturday night.

Marie, her brother Shane, and their teacher Ms. Anglin got out of the car. Marie wiped her hands on her jeans. They got the cooler and the guitar out of the trunk and started down the old logging road. They had to go around the wet mud pit in the middle of the road, had to walk up into the woods a little bit, over rocks they couldn't see for dead leaves, and then back down onto the wide path, until the shadows they'd been watching became people and they could feel the bonfire heat on their own faces.

Marie stopped counting how many of these parties she'd been to there in the woods in Larkin County. At home in Caudill, she and Shane would never be invited to a place like this, at the end of an old logging road, not with people like the Owenses. Shane didn't care, he was just putting in time with Ms. Anglin until he started college. Ms. Anglin wanted to go because they were her people, the Owenses. Nobody knew Ms. Anglin down in Larkin County except the Owenses, and they were too busy getting wild to worry about who she brought to their parties.

Shane and Marie set the cooler down in the usual place, and the usual guy took out three beers the second it hit the ground, before Marie could take her seat on it. Marie was seventeen and her job was just to be there. Keep her parents from thinking Shane was into anything wild. Keep her mouth shut about him and Ms. Anglin. Marie watched the Owenses, listened to their music about Sin City, listened to them talk. She wanted to talk with them, about camping and going four-wheeling and staying up all night. Someday she would do that, she would just go over and sit right there among them and talk with them, instead of sitting over on the cooler, watching.

They hadn't been there more than fifteen minutes when Marie caught a flash of movement from across the fire. Shane in his white T-shirt among all the gray and brown clothes of the Owenses, Ms. Anglin in her black silky kimono top. They were fighting again. Ms. Anglin pushed Shane's shoulder, then closed in on him and wouldn't let him move. Marie couldn't hear the words but she knew what it was about, same as all their other fights. Shane was going away to college, he was going to leave her, go off to Lexington and not ever look back. She just knew it, she said. They were less like fights, more like a sad clown who

won't let her audience leave. Shane usually let her vent until she was ready to pass out.

Ms. Anglin was right up in his face this time though, her finger an inch from his nose. Shane looked at her for a minute then down at her finger. He moved his head back so he could get a better look at it. Then he opened his mouth and lunged. He bit down on her finger and her back arched so very slightly at the pain. She stood silent and motionless and there they were in a weird frozen pose, connected tooth to finger. Marie couldn't help but think about finding the two of them in the school darkroom Shane's sophomore year, connected then too, but at different parts of their bodies. Then the frozen picture moved and Ms. Anglin screamed and all hell broke loose around them. One of Ms. Anglin's girl cousins saw what happened and swatted at Shane, he opened his mouth and let the finger go. Ms. Anglin brought her hurt hand to her chest, cradled it with the other hand. She cursed Shane. Then she looked down at her finger. "It's bleeding!" she screamed.

Everybody at the party looked at the two of them. The Owens brothers circled around. Marie went and stood in the circle too. "What the hell?" one of the brothers asked, the one named Keith.

"You punk!" Ms. Anglin said. "You stupid punk! Come here!" She slapped Shane hard across the face. Then she hugged him. "I'm sorry," she said. And then she said, "Why did you do that?" She repeated those two things over and over, like a chant. "I'm sorry! Why did you do that?" People stood around them stiff-legged, not really sure if the fight was over.

"Shoot, Jilly, there's not even a mark on there," Keith said, leaning over her hand that was now around Shane's neck. The brothers moved away from the two of them, Ms. Anglin still

with her arms around Shane and saying something in his ear, Shane looking straight ahead, his arms down by his sides.

AFTER THE FIGHT, Shane disappeared into the woods up above the fire, left with one of the Owens boys to get high. As soon as he was out of sight, Ms. Anglin put a camp chair beside Marie. She got a beer and some ice out of the cooler then sat down and showed Marie her finger. "So what's going on with him?" she asked, holding the ice on her finger. "Does he have a girlfriend?"

"I thought you were his girlfriend," Marie said. There was something about Ms. Anglin that made Marie feel sorry for her, something about the way she always needed to be reassured.

"I've seen him talking to that Miller girl," Ms. Anglin said. "I know he's screwing that Miller girl. Oh God, I love him." Marie looked down at her hands in her lap, down at the ground, looked at anything except her journalism teacher. "I'm only six years older than him. That's nothing. In the grand scheme of things, it's a drip in the bucket."

You're a drip, Marie thought.

Ms. Anglin took a long drink. "What do you think? You think I'm too old for him, don't you?" but she wouldn't let Marie answer. "Shit, twenty-four's not old, I'm not old." After a few minutes, she said, "I love him, that's all. I just love him. He almost took my finger off." She held out her finger for Marie to inspect again but Marie didn't even pretend to look at it this time. "You been in love," she said. "You know."

Marie shook her head. Ms. Anglin had to bring up Kyle. "Nope," Marie said.

Ms. Anglin got up, threw down the ice she'd been holding to her finger. "It's crazy, man. It's crazy." Then she staggered around the fire to some of her cousins.

NIGHT GARDEN

MARIE SAW SHANE come down the hill and mix back into the party, which had shot to life after the finger bite, people had unloosed. Boys lost their shirts in the still-hot summer night, and girls took the ponytail holders off their wrists and put their hair up to get it off their necks. One girl fell off a hay bale. She was just sitting there and then she wasn't, she'd slumped all the way down to the ground. People gathered around to make sure she was okay. Two guys did karate on each other on the other side of the fire. Somewhere up in the darkness, above the log road in the woods, a voice yelled out *Heeelll yeeeah!*

Shane came over to Marie, got a beer from the cooler and took a gulp. He made a sour face and blew out the beer. "Hot as piss," he said, then took another gulp anyway. "She can't even get beer cold." Ms. Anglin stood across the fire from them, beside a big rock with Keith, his brother Ed, and his sister Nikki. Ms. Anglin hadn't noticed Shane was back or she would have been sitting right there between Marie and her brother.

"I can't wait to be out of here," Shane said, his eyes still on Ms. Anglin. He'd leave for Lexington the next day, move-in day for the University of Kentucky summer session.

"What about Ms. Anglin?" Marie asked.

"Hell," he said, and shook his head. He took another drink of the warm beer. "Sorority girls, that's what I'm—" He made a clicking noise with his mouth and winked.

One of the karate guys kicked the other one into the fire. He rolled out of the flames, smoke coming off of him, but nobody got excited. He jumped up and held up his hands like he'd scored a touchdown and yelled *I'm all right! I'm all right!*

"She thinks you're messing with that cheerleader," Marie said.

Shane gave her his serious look, his older brother look, like she shouldn't talk like that. All his gestures were exaggerated

and slow because he was so high. "It doesn't matter," he said. "It just doesn't matter." He leaned over toward Marie so he could talk low. "Listen," he said, "it's over. *Shhh!*" He pointed at Ms. Anglin then put his finger up to his mouth. "*Shhh!* Don't tell her."

Marie was glad he told her his secret. People did that, told her secrets, she didn't know why.

"You're going to have to take care of yourself," Shane said. He leaned over and nudged her with his shoulder. "Okay?" He leaned over onto her again, a little harder this time, needing some response from her.

"I will."

"You know if it gets weird you can call me."

Marie nodded. There were a lot of things Marie and Shane didn't talk about, including their parents, but they both knew what he meant.

"Just, you know," he said.

"Yeah," she said.

WHEN THEY LEFT the party, it was almost light. They drove back down the gravel road, onto a blacktop road, then north on Highway 25. They passed the little white houses and tan trailers of Larkin County. The few houses were bunched up together along the road, probably a grandma in the older small white house, aunts and uncles and cousins in the newer houses and trailers clustered around it.

Then they drove through the town of Crawford. The town looked like it had died a long time ago, with boarded-up buildings, a pool hall with an open door and a mattress in the doorway, an auto parts store, a drugstore, a dollar store, and some lawyer offices locked up tight with bars over plate glass windows.

NIGHT GARDEN

Ms. Anglin woke up for a second, leaned across the seat, and put her head on Shane's shoulder as he drove. "I sure am going to miss you, tadpole," she said, and fell back asleep. Shane sped up to seventy on the straight part of the highway.

When they got to Ms. Anglin's house, Shane and Marie lugged her gear from the trunk and dropped it on her front porch.

"See you," Shane said and gave a goodbye salute.

Marie stayed on the porch steps for a minute. Ms. Anglin shook her head, told Marie to call her. Shane honked the horn. Marie jumped off the steps and ran through the yard to his car, and they drove on home to Caudill.