

A NOVEL

H O M E F I E L D

The book cover features a photograph of a rural landscape. In the foreground, there is a field of tall, golden-brown grass. In the middle ground, a red two-story house with a white porch and a white barn are visible. Two tall stadium lights stand on either side of the house. The background is filled with trees, some with autumn foliage, and a cloudy sky. The title 'HOME FIELD' is written in large, teal, serif capital letters across the top. The author's name 'HANNAH GERSEN' is written in white, sans-serif capital letters at the bottom.

HANNAH GERSEN



Chapter 1

The boy cried helplessly in Dean's office. He wiped his face with his scrimmage jersey, but it was too sweaty to be of any use to him. Even without his pads, the boy's shoulders were unusually square and broad. He looked like a grown man, with dark stubble already arriving in the late afternoon. Dean remembered scouting him from eighth-grade Field Day. He was big even then, uncoordinated but strong, his thick black hair growing as wildly as his body and long enough for a ponytail. He threw the shot put like it was nothing much, something slightly heavier than a softball. His name was Laird Kemp. Dean stood on the sidelines and watched him, writing a summer conditioning regimen on the blue index cards he always carried in the side pocket of his windbreaker. He gave it to the boy and told him to try out for junior varsity football in the fall. Four years later, Laird was their middle linebacker, the linchpin of their defensive unit. And he was telling Dean that he was sorry, but his family was moving in two weeks. His dad's company—Mac Truck—had transferred him to another one of their corporate offices.

"I'm sorry, Coach. I know I should have told you sooner. I don't know why my dad has to take this job."

“I’m sure he has good reasons.” Dean knew Laird’s parents fairly well. Like Dean, they weren’t originally from Willowboro, which was a significant line of demarcation. They were also better off than most and lived in one of the nicer suburbs outside of town. They liked football as much as anyone and gave generously to the Boosters, but it wasn’t their priority. They probably wanted Laird to spend his senior year preparing for college.

“I don’t want to go to a new school,” Laird said. He took a deep breath to steady himself. “I’m happy here. Things are good for me.”

“Things will be good for you in your new school,” Dean said. “I’ll give a call to that coach over there. I’ll tell him how lucky he is to have you joining his team.”

Garrett Schwartz, the assistant coach, appeared in Dean’s doorway. “You’re leaving? You can’t leave! We need you!”

Typical Garrett: awkward, blunt, and easily excited. He was the athletic director in addition to his role as assistant coach. His slightly built figure was a familiar sight at the beginning of every game as, clipboard in hand, he checked to make sure the facility was clean, the scoreboard turned on, the bleachers pulled down, and the soda and snack machines stocked and lit. He checked in with the cheerleaders, the Boosters, the refs, the coaches, and anyone else he recognized. He always had a whistle and a stopwatch around his neck, the stopwatch strung on a gimp lanyard that the cheerleaders had made one year for Spirit Week. Dean had given his lanyard to Stephanie.

“Don’t worry about us,” Dean said to Laird. “Go and shower. We’ll tell the team tomorrow.”

“I can come to practice tomorrow?”

“Of course.”

Garrett began to brainstorm ideas for a replacement as soon as the kid was out of earshot. No one was as built as Laird—or as aggressive. That was the thing about Laird; even though his temperament was mellow, almost timid, he was ruthless on the field. Dean had a theory: Because Laird had always been big for his age, he’d had to learn how to be gentle, or risk hurting littler boys. When he played football, he could show his true strength.

“What about Jimmy Smoot?” Garrett asked. “He bulked up over the summer.”

“He’s fast,” Dean said. “He’s got a sprinter’s build. You don’t let that kind of speed go.”

“I’ll put him down as a question mark,” Garrett said. “All the Smoots are linebacker material. It’s in their genes. I went to high school with Jimmy’s cousin. His nickname was Bear.”

Garrett knew everyone in Willowboro. He had lived in the area all his life. Dean had arrived when he was twenty-six. Even after fifteen years of coaching and a half-dozen championship teams, he still felt he was regarded as an outsider.

“Okay, here’s an idea,” Garrett said. “I’ve actually been thinking of it for a while, but I sat on it because I know you don’t like to poach from other teams.”

“That’s a firm policy of mine,” Dean said.

“I know, but there’s this pitcher on the baseball team, a junior, and he’s a big guy, okay? Kind of a gut, maybe, but we can work with that. He’s got a really fast pitch. He’s already being scouted. His name’s Devlin, Mark Devlin.”

“I know Devlin. He takes gym every year,” Dean said. “I don’t want him getting injured.”

“But he wouldn’t necessarily,” Garrett said. “And I think if we leaned on him, he would play.”

“You asked him already?”

“I ran the idea by him in the spring. I was at a game. He said he didn’t see himself as a football player, but you should see him pitch, he’s an animal. He’ll hit the batters if he has to.”

“If he doesn’t come here voluntarily, I don’t want him,” Dean said. “Remember Tyler Shelton? He ruined his knee playing football. Lost a basketball scholarship because of my dumb sales pitch. Trust me, you don’t want that kind of guilt.”

The phone rang and Dean picked up right away. It was Stephanie, reminding him in a sour voice to be home by four.

“I have a dinner shift, okay?” she said. “So please don’t be late again.”

“You know I can’t get home early on double days.”

“You’re going to have to figure something out, because I’m only here one more week. Or did you forget that, too?”

The line went dead, but Dean said good-bye before hanging up. Garrett made a show of flipping through the papers on his clipboard.

“Everything okay?” He glanced at Dean quickly.

“I have to get home,” Dean said, ignoring Garrett’s half-assed attempt at meaningful conversation. Garrett didn’t really want to know. No one did. “Would you mind taking a look at the playbook? Find all the ones that we wrote for Laird. We’re going to have to change things up.”

“I’ll mark it and make a copy for you.”

“You don’t have to do that. We can compare notes tomorrow.”

Dean left, grabbing his cap on the way out. He’d worn his

oldest one today, with the retired logo: a sunrise between two mountains with a small bird gliding in the corner. Now the bird—an eagle—was front and center, the mountains in the background. The sun had been removed.

Outside there were piles of grass clippings everywhere, but no mower in sight. The groundsman liked to start and finish his days early and was probably already at home on his deck, enjoying a cold one. When Dean first started coaching at Willowboro, it had been up to him to maintain the football and practice fields, a side duty he had thoroughly enjoyed, riding atop the whirring mower in the early evenings, feeling at once productive and leisurely as the sky above turned orange and then pink and then violet. He'd lime the sidelines in the dusky light and they would seem to glow. The next morning it would all be waiting for him in bright primary colors.

Dean always felt as if he needed August, as if these long days of practice, unfettered by academic or familial demands, were an interlude that restored him in some way, a time of simple feeling and nostalgia that connected the man he had become to the boy he had once been. It was the time of year when he felt that he knew who he was.

But this year that clarity was gone.

Don't try to get to the end of your grief. That's what his mother-in-law had told him. She had moved in with them for a few weeks over the summer, and Dean still missed their late-night conversations.

Two teachers waved to Dean from the other end of the lot. Dean waved back vaguely. He didn't know the other faculty that well. He was sequestered in the east annex, where his office, the weight rooms, and the locker rooms bordered two

gyms, one large and one small. The teachers' lounge was at the other end of the school. That was fine with him. Although he taught PE, Dean didn't think coaching had much to do with teaching. He was more like a mechanic, or a horse trainer, like his father. The point was, he didn't consider his work to be intellectual. He'd never thought this was unusual, but Nicole had seized on it on one of their first dates.

"But the kids learn so much from you," she'd said. "Of course you're a teacher."

"All I care about is winning games. If they happen to learn something in the process, that's just a by-product."

She'd laughed, but he wasn't going to be one of those men who claimed that football was "character building." It wasn't a civilized sport. The training could be brutal. The players were often crude. He could think of few lessons that would serve anyone for a lifetime. It was a moment-by-moment kind of game. That was why he needed it now. All summer long he had been living "one day at a time," as everyone advised. It was an act of will not to look ahead, not to think about all the ways his future had been destroyed. He tried not to look back, either, but that was harder. Everyone said he couldn't blame himself, but Dean knew they were all thinking the same thing, that it would never happen to them, that they would never *let* it happen. And at the same time everyone told him how shocked they were, how they had *no idea*, how they never would have guessed that someone like her, a woman so, so, so . . . they always struggled to say what had fooled them. So normal, perhaps. Or maybe: so undefined. So easy to project happiness onto.

Maybe they all just had crushes on her. Dean got notes of

condolence from her country club clients, most of them male, all of them recalling Nicole's sunny nature. *She always had a smile for me*, one wrote. *As if that meant anything*, Dean thought bitterly. He hated how grief made him cynical. The world, for him, was now full of shortsighted, awkward idiots.

Dean drove down Main Street, which was actually Route 40, an old road you could take west all the way to Utah. Or east to Baltimore. Dean could still remember learning the roads in the area, before everything became rote, before he met Nicole. There had been a time when he wasn't even sure he'd stay very long in this particular corner of western Maryland, this tiny town tucked into the skinny arm of the state. Even though it was several hours from his father's, it had seemed too close to where he'd grown up. Or maybe it had just seemed too small.

Willowboro had never been prosperous or historically significant. Unlike other nearby towns, which had hosted Civil War battles and bunkered generals, Willowboro's wartime role was to receive the bodies of the dead after the Battle of Antietam. This ghoulish task had taken place in the town's livery stables, now the site of Weddle's Nursing Home. The place gave Dean the creeps, but he had to visit it every October with his players. They would sing fight songs, and then Dean would give an overview of the season, with slides. It was called "A Night with the Coach," and it was open to the whole town. The point was to get people to visit their infirm relatives, and it worked. Only Christmastime was busier.

Dean turned right at the stoplight, driving past the four businesses that were the cornerstones of Willowboro's social life: Asaro's Pizza, Mike's Video Time, Jenny's Luncheonette, and the post office. Willow Park was tucked behind them, a

small but quaint landscape with arched stone bridges, wooden pavilions, playgrounds, and, of course, willow trees—the grandchildren of the original trees, planted at the turn of the century. Before it was called Willowboro, the town was called Weddle, for its founding brothers. Dean thought that the dopey, sleepy-sounding “Weddle” was more fitting.

Willowboro was bounded by two stoplights, and the town quickly thinned out on either side of them, the sidewalks peetering out to accommodate the shoulders of wider roads. The Legion Hall, with its beige siding and sloping black roof, marked the edge of town. The football banquet, homecoming dance, and prom were held there every year. A half mile past the Legion Hall was Shank’s Produce, which was owned by Dean’s sort-of in-laws, Vivian and Walter Shank. The Shanks were the parents of Nicole’s first husband, Sam. Sam was buried ten miles from here, and after the Shanks moved away, they talked about getting him exhumed to a cemetery closer to them. Nicole thought they said things like this to get under her skin, but Dean thought they were just odd people. Stephanie liked them, though. And they were a good influence. He doubted she’d be going to a college like Swarthmore if they hadn’t pushed her to apply.

The new Sheetz loomed ahead, bright red and yellow and simple in design, like something a kid would make with Legos. Dean stopped to fill up and then decided to go ahead and get some subs for dinner. It was the third time this week they’d had them, but it was the only thing the boys ate with any kind of appetite.

He ran into Jimmy Smoot in the parking lot. He was with a girl Dean didn’t recognize and drinking a mouthwash-blue

Freeze. His Adam's apple bulged in his skinny, razor-burned neck and Dean thought that Garrett was wrong; this kid was not going to bulk up, not ever.

"Hey, Coach," Smoot said. "You tried these? It's team colors."

"You should drink chocolate milk after practice. You need protein with your carbohydrates."

The girl crossed her arms. "Plus milk doesn't give you Smurf lips."

"This is my sister, Missy," Smoot said. "She's going to be a freshman this year."

"*Melissa*," the girl corrected. She was tall, like her brother, and had his rangy, broad-shouldered frame, which she accentuated by wearing oversized clothing: baggy jean shorts and a black T-shirt with the word HOLE on it. Layered over the T-shirt was a short-sleeved button-down, also oversized. The ensemble was intensely unflattering, but Dean recognized it as "alt style." Stephanie had explained this term to him when she began to dress in the same way.

"Are you an athlete, like your brother?" Dean asked her.

"Missy's going out for cheer squad," Smoot said. "She can't help herself, she just has to cheer me on—oh, shoot! Brain freeze!" He pressed the heel of his palm to his forehead and squeezed his eyes shut, as if it was the worst pain he'd been in all day.

"You drink those things way too fast." Melissa turned to Dean. "I don't play sports. I'm not coordinated."

"Maybe you just haven't found the right sport."

"Maybe." She nudged her brother. "Come on, you said you'd drop me off."

“Yeah, okay. See you Monday, Coach.”

They waved guilelessly, completely absorbed by the logistics of their evening and the politics of siblinghood. They couldn't see Nicole's ghost, and for that, Dean was grateful. Both the best and worst thing about working with kids was that they had almost no ability to imagine life beyond the age of thirty.

Dean turned on the radio for the ride home, searching for WINQ, the oldies station he and Stephanie used to sing along to together. Once, they had been buddies, best friends. She had tagged along to every game, and sometimes even to practices, doing homework in the stands. She'd been three years old when he met Nicole, the young widow no one wanted to date—or maybe, the young widow everyone wanted to date but was too cautious to approach. Dean had no idea of her previous marriage. And neither did Stephanie. As far as she was concerned, Dean was her new father. He'd never pictured himself marrying a woman who already had a child, but after their first week together, he was already sitting next to her in a church pew, unwilling to be apart from her for any part of the weekend. He'd never fallen for someone so quickly, and it was exhilarating. When he and Nicole broke the happy news to Stephanie, she seemed confused. It took them a while to realize that she thought they were already married. They let her pick the wedding cake, and she chose to have it decorated with pink and purple flowers. She wore a ruffled pink-and-purple dress to match.

Now Stephanie was a different kind of girl altogether. She didn't fantasize about wedding cakes and she never wore pink. She had gone to her junior prom wearing a torn slip and a

man's blazer, her date a boy who was not the least bit interested in girls—a fact that unsettled Dean, though he was careful not to say so. Nicole was even more disappointed than he was. Stephanie had started high school on her mother's path: a cheerleader, a churchgoer, a smiling girl with smiling friends. But she started to change at the end of ninth grade. Nicole noticed before Dean did; it began with her clothes. Stephanie stopped shopping with Nicole at the mall and instead went to thrift stores to find items that no one else had. New clothes led to new friends; that was how it worked with girls, apparently. The new friends weren't bad—they were smart and polite—but they mystified Dean with their dark clothes, their dark looks, and their dark under-the-breath jokes. What did they have to be depressed about? There had been a war going on when he was in high school. He blamed the culture, the muddy-sounding music. He would watch MTV with Stephanie to try to figure it out. One of the singers mumbled so badly that his lyrics were put up on the screen, like subtitles. This guy wore a dress onstage. When he killed himself, Stephanie wanted to take a day off from school. An absurd request, Dean thought, not even worth acknowledging, but somehow it turned into one of her and Nicole's bigger fights. Sometimes it seemed as if the two of them could not even breathe the same air. Dean's policy was impartiality. Nicole thought he was taking Stephanie's side.

Dean turned onto Iron Bridge Road, a lane divided into two sections: one old, narrow, and badly paved, and the other new, wide, and smooth as a highway. Dean lived in the old section, where the road's namesake, a wrought-iron bridge, had once stood. It was demolished in the late seventies and re-

placed by a plain cement structure with thick safety rails made of corrugated metal. Dean might have seen the original if he'd arrived in Willowboro just a couple of years earlier. He was genuinely sorry to have missed it. He'd had a fondness for Iron Bridge Road even before he lived on it. When he first moved to the area, he would take long bike rides in the country, lacking anything better to do. He remembered discovering the old part of Iron Bridge Road and thinking it would be a good place to build a house. He had been surprised, later, when Nicole agreed. Her family all lived close to one another on a farm on the outskirts of town. He assumed she would want to stay near them. But she had wanted a change.

They ended up buying an old house and constructing an addition, instead of building something new. It was a simple two-story stone house, similar to others in the area, made from gray limestone and white mortar, with small square windows, evenly spaced and white-silled. The house's selling point was a double-decker side porch, a real Maryland porch. In the summer, the boys liked to spend the night there, dragging their sleeping bags right up against the window. Mornings they'd come downstairs with imprints of the screen on their cheeks. Their real bedroom was downstairs, in the addition. Robbie had been planning to move into Stephanie's upstairs bedroom after she left for college, but he hadn't mentioned it recently. The boys had once complained about having to room together; now they seemed pleased to have a shared retreat, a reason never to be alone.

Dean didn't see Stephanie's car in the driveway as he approached his house. He pulled in and saw that it wasn't parked in the shady side yard, either.

He cursed aloud. He had wanted to say good-bye before she left. He was becoming superstitious.

There was no note in the kitchen and the boys weren't in their usual spot, playing Nintendo in the living room. He checked their bedroom, but it was empty.

He went to the back porch and called for them in the yard. "Robbie! Bry!" Then he went upstairs to check from his bedroom window, where he could see into the backyard and surrounding fields. His door was closed, which was odd, since he usually left it open. Nicole was the one who would close it—a signal to him to leave her alone. Had he left her alone too often? Not enough? It was impossible to know in retrospect.

With Nicole so strongly in his mind, Dean wasn't surprised, at first, to see her clothes strewn across the bed. It was a sight that had greeted him many mornings when he emerged from the shower. "What's the weather like?" she would ask, as if their bathroom was a portal to the outdoors. He always said, "Partly cloudy." One day he added, "with a chance of hail," and that stuck for years, becoming funny for no good reason. At some point she stopped asking.

He gazed at the clothes, the layers of patterns clashing with the bedspread. Florals, bright colors, lots of blue—to bring out her eyes. Stephanie must have been going through them to see if there was anything she wanted to bring with her to college. He'd told her to take a look in the closet before he gave them away, but he didn't think she actually would. He began to pile the clothes into the hamper. They rustled and he thought he heard whispering. "Nic?" he said aloud, involuntarily. The room was silent. He didn't believe in ghosts. He didn't even try

to talk to Nic in prayer. Still, he felt that someone was in the room with him.

“Boys?” he called.

He heard the whisper again. It was coming from underneath the bed.

“Boys?” Dean knelt to lift the duster. There they were, squeezed together, their eyes bright like little animals’. “What are you doing?”

“Playing hide-and-seek,” Robbie said.

“Who are you hiding from?”

“Steffy.”

“She said to tell you she went to work,” Bry added.

“No, she *didn’t*.”

“She did so—ow!”

Dean stood up. “Look, I don’t care, just get out from under there.”

“Can you go down to the kitchen and we’ll meet you there?” Robbie asked.

“No,” Dean said, sharply—too sharply, he knew, but he was losing patience. They were hiding something, obviously, something that was probably nothing, but in their kid brains it was worth lying about.

“Please,” Robbie said.

“Hurry up,” Dean said. “I’m waiting.”

There was no movement, and Dean thought he was going to have to lift the box spring off the frame, but then Bry began to wriggle out on his stomach. At first, Dean noticed nothing unusual about his eight-year-old son’s appearance. His dark-blond hair was its usual cowlicked mess, his cheeks flushed, his fingernails dirty. It wasn’t until Bry’s torso was completely ex-

posed that Dean realized his son was wearing a woman's white blouse. Nicole's blouse. He was wearing a skirt, too. It was green with tiny yellow polka dots. The skirt, which had been knee-length on Nicole, hit Bryan midcalf. Dust bunnies clung to the hem.

"Daddy—" Bry began.

Dean held up his hand. "Robbie! Did you put your brother up to this?"

"Why do you always blame me?"

"Get out from under there right now."

Robbie rolled out at the foot of the bed. He was wearing one of Nicole's dresses, a pale blue one with buttons down the front. On his feet he wore a pair of her heels, with bows. Everything feminine about his older son—his shaggy overgrown hair, his long-lashed and expressive eyes, his slender neck and arms—was brought into relief.

"Steffy was trying things on—" Bry said.

"Never mind! I don't want to hear it. Just get back in your regular clothes."

Bry began to cry. He was always the first to do so; sometimes he seemed to be the family's designated mourner, tearing up whenever his mother's name was mentioned by some sympathy-wishing stranger. "I'm sorry," he said, wiping his nose with Nicole's ruffled cuff.

"I'm sorry, too," Dean said. "I'm sorry I had to see this."

"It's not that big a deal." Robbie tossed his head to get his hair out of his eyes. Dean had to look away, but when he averted his gaze, he caught his sons' bizarre image in Nicole's vanity mirror.

"Just change back into your clothes, all right?" Dean said.

“Steffy said you told her to try things on. So can’t we?”

“Don’t be smart with me. You know the answer to that question.”

“Why didn’t you just get rid of them?” Robbie said. “Stephanie already has a ton of dead-lady clothes from Goodwill.”

“Don’t talk about your mother that way.”

“What, that she’s dead?”

“We’re not a family that just dumps things at Goodwill.”

“What kind of family are we?”

“I don’t know, Robbie! Will you get out of those clothes?”

Bryan was still crying. “I’m sorry, Daddy! I didn’t know you would be so mad.”

“It’s okay,” Dean said. He glared at Robbie over Bryan’s head. “I’m going downstairs. I want you down there in five minutes, in your normal clothes. Got it?”

Bryan immediately began to unbutton Nicole’s ruffled blouse. Dean hurried out, not wanting to see his scrawny chest beneath. In the kitchen, he got a beer and downed it quickly, and then opened a second can and poured it into a glass, like he was a civilized person having a drink at the end of the day. Everyone had told him this would happen, that his boys would “act out,” but Dean had steeled himself for something quite different. He thought they would pick fights, punch walls, break things. Instead they had become quiet. They never talked about their mother, except when Dean brought her up, and even then, they said very little. He never had any idea what they were thinking. And now this. He couldn’t even tell anyone about it. There was a sexual element that disturbed him.

“Boys!” he called.

They came downstairs together. It was such a relief to see

them in their T-shirts and shorts that Dean immediately apologized.

“Let’s go out to dinner, okay?” he said. “We can go to the Red Byrd and surprise your sister.”

“But you got subs,” Robbie said, pointing.

“We can have them tomorrow,” Dean said. “Come on, don’t you want to get out of the house? You’ve been stuck here all afternoon.”

Only Bryan nodded, but that was enough for Dean.

The radio came on loud when Dean started the car, startling the boys, but somehow it cleared the air.

“Steffy’s leaving next week,” Dean said. “We have to figure out something for you to do when I’m at practice.”

“I don’t want to go to Aunt Joelle’s,” Robbie said.

“You don’t like playing with your cousins?” He wasn’t eager to leave them with Joelle, but there was no reason for them to know that.

“She has Bible verses taped up everywhere,” Bryan said. “And she makes you say one before she gives you a snack.”

“It’s good exercise for your brain to memorize things,” Dean said, trying to find the secular virtue. Joelle’s fundamentalism was getting harder to ignore. It had started before Nicole’s death, but then he’d had Nicole as a buffer. Or maybe it was that Joelle had spent her energies trying to convert Nicole instead of him. She thought love of Jesus could cure Nicole, that modern psychology was a crock. Dean was no big fan of psychology, either, with all its doped-up promises, but he thought Joelle’s minister told bigger lies, with his shiny face and his PowerPoint “teachings.” Nic had gone to Joelle’s church one Sunday and returned confused. “They actually think they’re

talking to God,” she said. “Can you understand that?” Dean’s answer had been no, he couldn’t. He assumed that God had more important people to talk with.

“What if we went to Grandpa’s?” Robbie said.

“Grandpa lives too far away,” Dean said, carefully.

“We could stay overnight,” Robbie said.

“All week? No, that’s not going to work.” He couldn’t believe they wanted to go back there.

“Maybe Grandpa could come live with us,” Bry said.

“Grandpa would never leave his horses,” Robbie said.

Dean had long since accepted that his father preferred horses to people, but it was still jarring to hear Robbie say it. At Nicole’s memorial, his father talked about how good she was with the horses, and how much they would miss her. It was as if he could only understand the loss by imagining the animals’ response.

The Red Byrd was up ahead, with its row of cardinals perched on the roof and its old-fashioned marquee promising the best red velvet cake in Maryland. The parking lot was already crowded with cars. Dean snagged one of the last shady spots, next to a car with a bumper sticker that read MY CHILD IS AN HONOR STUDENT AT WILLOWBORO HIGH. They had four of those stickers at home, but Stephanie forbade their display.

Inside the restaurant, the atmosphere was noisy and friendly. Dean eyed a corner booth and asked the hostess if it was in Stephanie’s section.

“Steph’s not working tonight. I think she’s on tomorrow night.”

“Are you sure?” Dean asked.

“I can double-check the schedule—”

“No, it’s all right. I must have gotten mixed up. We’ll just take the booth, if it’s free.”

They followed the hostess across the dining room, past a couple of people Dean knew from the Boosters Club. He nodded in their direction. He knew he should stop and chat, but he didn’t.

“Steffy lied?” Bry said.

“Obviously,” Robbie said.

Dean gazed at his placemat, seeking solace in its usual lists of presidents or cocktail recipes, but instead found himself staring at last year’s football stats, a nearly undefeated season. The Red Byrd had printed these placemats after they won the state championship—a triumph dampened for Dean by Nicole’s depression and Stephanie’s disdain. Neither of them had gone to many games last fall. As Dean read the old scores, numbers he could have recited in his sleep, he had a sudden, fervent wish for Nicole to return, to sit here beside him and put her hand on his leg. The wish radiated through him, through the whole of his day. Through every day.

A waitress appeared, greeting him by name. “You like our placemats?” she asked. “We’re going to have to make another batch this year, I bet.”

“I sure hope so,” Dean said, forcing a smile.

“You boys ready to order?”

Robbie and Bryan stared at her silently.

“I think we’re going to need some more time,” Dean said.

IT WAS STILL light outside when they got home from the Red Byrd, so Dean suggested a walk through the meadow behind their house and down to the creek. The boys agreed, picking

up walking sticks in the backyard. They had been shy with him all through dinner, but by dessert they'd relaxed. Dean blamed himself for yelling at them earlier, but he blamed Stephanie, too. Her absence had put them all on edge. They were so fragile right now that any little thing worried them. Stephanie was a mother figure, whether she liked it or not. Dean thought she liked it, but it was hard to tell. Sometimes Dean got the feeling she was putting off her grieving until she was away at college, where she could be alone. Other times he thought she had decided to just put her mother's death out of her mind, something to be dealt with later. It hurt him that she would not admit her sorrow to him; it hurt him even though it had been years since she shared anything *true* with him. He was accustomed to being shut out from her world.

Down by the creek, the air was cooler. Robbie and Bry took off their shoes and socks and waded into the water. The creek was narrow here, no more than twenty feet across, and shallow, littered with hundreds of smooth, baseball-sized stones that created small disturbances in the current. The boys had spent much of their summer down here, industriously piling small rocks into dams, only to find them dismantled the next time they visited. But they didn't seem to care about their progress—or at least, Robbie didn't. At eleven, he wavered between adult interests and childish ones, capable of discussing current events and football strategies with Dean, but also still interested in building Lego cities or cuddling with his stuffed animals, which he arranged on his bed every morning, in a particular order. The image of Robbie in Nicole's pale blue dress flitted through Dean's mind before he could dismiss it. He could accept the behavior if it had been instinctual, if

Robbie hadn't really thought about it, if it was an act of grief, of confusion—not pleasure. But what if Nicole's death had perverted him in some way? Dean was angry with Nicole for not thinking of this; he had to believe she hadn't been able to fully imagine the consequences of her actions.

He had to believe it, and yet he couldn't.

Dean tried to recall some of the strange things he'd done after his own mother left. But it wasn't the same because his mother hadn't died; she'd just married another man, a salesman she'd met in the hospital where she worked as a nurse's aide—*not even a nurse*, Dean used to think, when he wanted to think ill of his mother. He'd taken his father's side, calling his mother a self-loathing snob. He assumed she left because she was tired of being married to a borderline servant. His father had worked on a bigger farm then, and they'd lived in a small house near the training grounds of a pristine estate surrounded by white fences that were painted every spring. The farm was owned by one of the oldest horsing families in the state, not that Dean's father would ever describe his employer that way. It was the horses Dean's father admired, not the lavish properties, not the races, not even the status that went along with being the kind of person who stabled such beautiful animals.

There were dozens of people like Dean's father, people who humbled themselves in moneyed society in order to be close to horses. Why were all these men and women, possessed of beautifully calibrated efficient muscle and bone, wistfully gazing at horses as if their strength were somehow more mysterious? The one time Dean had felt close to his father's horses was when he was in training for his first varsity season. He was

out for a jog and the grazing horses broke into a run toward him, as if to say, *It's easy, don't you see?* As a teenager he'd seen his father as a weak person, a minor failure, not because of his job but because his mother had cheated on him. After she left, Dean's father stopped working with racehorses, taking a more low-key job at the farm where he now worked. It was for Dean's benefit, but Dean resented it. He did everything he could to be different from his father, starting with his body.

In the summer between ninth and tenth grade, Dean bought a pair of running shoes and a set of dumbbells and got a book from the library called *Speed, Strength & Agility*. He did every workout in the book, marking each one with a penciled checkmark. Every two weeks he had to renew the book, and he would run the 4.7 miles to the library in town, carrying it in a backpack. It was easier each time, his muscles a little less sore afterward. In the barn, in one of the unused stalls, he set up a makeshift weight room. The barn was hot, a dry and dusty heat. The smell of hay and horseshit—sweet and fetid—seemed to make the place even hotter. Dean kept a canteen of ice water next to him, his reward between sets. Water never tasted so good. Cold never tasted so good. In the evening he took baths, his muscles aching and expanding. Sleep came immediately; it was like going into a dark cave. Dean doubted he'd ever been healthier. Whenever he got on a self-improvement kick, when he dieted or tried to get “back in shape,” it was this elusive time that he was chasing.

Dean's mother was athletic, and Dean would begrudgingly admit that he owed his love of sports to her. He remembered watching the 1964 Olympics with her when Billy Mills won the 10,000 meters out of nowhere, upsetting the race, the an-

nouncer screaming, “Look at Mills! Look at Mills!” and his mother jumping up and yelling, “Go! Go! Go!” It was rare for her to show that level of excitement. He saw now that she was an unhappy person, perhaps wanting to escape her marriage for a long time before she actually did. On weekends she would take Dean for hikes on the Appalachian Trail, smiling back at him sometimes but mostly keeping her gaze ahead, fixed on the trail. Dean wondered now why his father had not joined them. His mother taught him how to swim, and she liked to tell a story about the time a diving instructor singled her out at a public pool and said she should train professionally. But her high school didn’t even have sports for women. At his most charitable, Dean imagined his mother had been born at the wrong time, unable to make use of her strong, muscular frame. She’d had so much energy. That was her best quality. She’d died of a heart attack while she was out picking up trash alongside the road. It was something she did every morning, walking three miles after breakfast. A state trooper had seen her collapse, with her garbage bag full of bottles and cans and fast-food wrappers. Dean had to explain to the police it was her Good Samaritan hobby, that she wasn’t some homeless person.

He felt relieved after she died, like he had one less person to worry about. But he knew he wouldn’t feel that way when his father passed away. He still needed his father. He didn’t think of him as weak anymore. His father had been the one to cut Nicole down. Dean didn’t ask him how he’d done it, but he had seen the standing ladder and the hay bales next to it, draped with a horse blanket. He must have laid her body down on the bales. He must have done it fast. Maybe the ladder was already in place. It must have been. But it would have been hard to

carry her down alone. Adrenaline must have flooded his body; Dean knew what it felt like to want to protect your children.

His father came with him to the hospital, and he stayed up with him that night. They'd watched a baseball game because what else were they supposed to do? Stephanie came into the room in the middle of it, and the expression on her face was one of such pure disgust that Dean got a jolt back to his own adolescence, remembering those sharp, hot judgments that would seem to burn inside him. He hadn't thought she would hold on to her resentment the next day, but he had been wrong. She held on to it all summer. After a while, he'd realized she was blaming him the same way he'd blamed his father after his mother left.

Bry called to him, pointing, and Dean saw a heron standing calmly on the opposite shore, one leg drawn up. The bird had something of Stephanie's stern regarding manner, the affect she'd adopted when she began to change in high school. After the new clothes and the new friends, she'd started quitting things: cheerleading, choir, student council, and even church. Her reasoning, that she wanted to concentrate more on academics, was foolproof. And she had the grades to prove it. How could they complain? Dean thought he understood, having pulled away from his own parents, but Nicole didn't get it. She'd never left the town where she'd grown up. She'd married her high school sweetheart. College was her big adventure, and she talked about it like it had been a visit to a faraway place, even though she'd gone to a Christian school just an hour away. Sam had been at the same school, recruited to play football for their no-name team. Nicole remembered him as a big star, though—the whole town did. Sometimes Dean got

annoyed and wanted to point out that he couldn't have been that great if he ended up at a Division III program.

He hated to think of the stories people would tell about Nic: the girl who was widowed too young. The girl whose broken heart had never quite healed. The girl who tried in vain to replace her football star husband with the high school football coach. People were already acting as if she were destined to be some perfect ghost, putting her alongside Sam in heaven, under the banner of First Love. It was offensive to Dean, the way it overlooked his and Nicole's fourteen years of marriage—somehow four years with Sam surpassed that. People were invested in Sam because they'd watched him grow up. Dean understood that. But he'd thought that the town was invested in him, too. He'd become a father to Sam's daughter, he'd taken care of Nicole, he'd coached a championship team. Everyone had seemed so grateful; he had *felt* so grateful. Those early years were easy, busy years. He could still remember the piles of gifts when Robbie was born: the baskets of food, the bouquets of flowers, the boxes of homemade fudge. He felt as if people were paying him homage, as if he were a minor king.

The heron was still standing there, glowing more whitely now that the light was fading. Dean called to the boys, and they started, as if they'd forgotten he was with them. The heron was startled, too, and stretched its wings. Suddenly it was in flight, sailing low, just a few feet above the water. Its white form was like a streak of fresh paint against the muddy creek.

Robbie and Bry waded back to shore, where their shoes and socks were waiting for them. Together, the three of them climbed the steep bank and walked across the meadow that led to their house.

There was an aluminum-foil-wrapped pie pan sitting on their front step. People were still dropping off baked goods. Dean didn't know how to make it stop.

"Peach," said Robbie, sniffing.

"I wish it was chocolate cake," Bry said.

Dean brought it inside and found a note tucked beneath the foil. It was from Julie Frye, a woman from church. Most of the baked goods he received were from church ladies. Joelle said they were "on the prowl." Dean couldn't help thinking that each of these little offerings was meant to make him feel guilty for skipping services, week after week. He stuck it in the fridge with all the other leftovers, wedging it so tightly that he ended up knocking over something in the back. It was one of Nicole's bottles of sunscreen. She liked it to be cool when she put it on her face. He gazed at the white bottle with its orange cartoon sun, little bits of the sun's rays chipped off with use. The boys were staring up at him.

"Can we watch TV?"

"If you get ready for bed first," Dean said.

"But it's still light out!"

"Just do it." Dean chose not to remind them that they fell asleep every night in front of the TV, a habit he hadn't meant to foster but had stopped trying to resist. TV, along with snacks, worked like a sedative to get them past the precarious border between waking and dreaming. It worked for Dean, too, although his snack was beer or bourbon.

"Can we have microwave popcorn?" Bryan asked.

"Sure, sure," Dean said. Outside, someone was pulling into his driveway. His first thought was Stephanie, but when he

checked the kitchen window, it was Garrett's shiny white Geo. He probably got it washed every week.

"Garrett," Dean said, meeting him at the side door.

"Hey, Coach. I just wanted to drop off the playbook, like I said." Garrett held up a manila envelope.

Dean opened the envelope and flipped through the book. There were notes on almost every page. Dean couldn't believe so many plays were going to be affected by Laird's departure.

"I got a little carried away and ended up staying late," Garrett said. "And then Brett Albright stopped by."

"What did he want?" Albright was his QB and team captain. He was one of Dean's favorites, a smart kid who had learned the game from his older brother, borrowing his playbook and memorizing it for fun. Dean had taken him out of JV his sophomore year even though he wasn't quite physically ready.

"His right shoulder is acting up, but we can talk about it later. I gave him some stretches. And, uh, I told him about Laird. I told him not to mention it."

"Okay." Dean didn't really feel like being annoyed with Garrett. "You want to come in for a beer?"

"I would," Garrett said, "but I have plans with Connie."

In the spring Garrett had begun dating a tennis instructor, a woman Dean had inadvertently introduced him to when he gave Garrett free passes to the country club where Nicole worked. Secretly Dean felt that Connie, who was fit and young and innocently pretty, was out of Garrett's league.

"Another time," Dean said. As he watched Garrett leave, he felt jealous, not only of Garrett's night ahead, but for the entire phase of life that Garrett was in—the beginning phase,

when everything was still unknown, but your goals were clear. If someone had told Dean last fall that he would be envious of his excitable assistant coach, Dean wouldn't have believed it. But here he stood, in his own yard, wishing he were the one driving away in that spotless little white car.

STEPHANIE STARED UP at Robert Smith, tacked to Mitchell's ceiling. His pale face seemed to glow in the dim light of the room. Mitchell's room was always dark and gloomy, the windows draped with layers of gauzy scarves from Goodwill and the lights turned down low. When Mitchell's parents were gone, he burned incense and played music that his father did not approve of, bands like Nine Inch Nails and Nirvana and, if Stephanie was visiting, Tori Amos. The incense was purely theatrical; Mitchell wasn't trying to cover the smell of anything. He didn't smoke pot or drink, although everyone assumed he did, with his laid-back persona and baggy, patchouli-drenched clothes. It used to be that only Stephanie knew how smart and driven he truly was, but getting into MIT had changed that. Now everyone called him Doogie Howser.

"You going to take all your posters with you to school?" Stephanie was trying, for what seemed like the tenth time, to get a conversation going. They usually talked easily, but they were having trouble tonight.

"Nah, I'm starting fresh," Mitchell said. "Maybe I'll be a minimalist."

"Yeah, right." Stephanie nodded to his dresser, crowded with a zoo of Tetley tea animals he'd inherited from his grandmother. Hung above them was his collection of black velvet

paintings, scrounged from yard sales. “You’re like the king of kitsch in here.”

“And you’re the queen in that dress.”

“It was my mother’s,” Stephanie said, with an awkward laugh. Her dress *was* kind of Holly Hobbie-ish, but she liked the simple print of yellow sunflowers on a black background.

“Sorry,” Mitchell said. He looked at her dolefully but without pity. He was the only person in her life who hadn’t treated her like a fragile flower after her mother’s death.

“You think it’s strange that I’m wearing her dress?”

“A little,” Mitchell said. “So what? You should do more strange things.”

Stephanie took this as a jab at her conventionality—one she would have welcomed before her mother’s death, but which now felt like a criticism. Lately she felt overly sensitive. She couldn’t handle Mitchell’s or anyone’s wisecracks; it was as if they put real cracks in her.

“It’s a little bit long,” Mitchell said. “Maybe you should shorten it.”

“You think so?” She and Mitchell often altered items they bought at thrift stores, usually with help from Mitchell’s mother. But this wasn’t the same thing, exactly.

“Definitely. I’ll go get my mom’s scissors.”

He left the room before Stephanie could protest. She had the sense he’d been looking for an excuse to leave.

Lying back down on his bed, she returned her attention to his collaged ceiling. Next to Robert Smith was Tuesday Weld, peering out from beneath a fur-collared coat, which was draped over her head, as if she needed to hide from something just out

of frame. The photo was from the cover of Matthew Sweet's album *Girlfriend*—Stephanie's favorite album, at one time. Mitchell just liked the cover—the romance of it, the lavender light, the borrowed glamour. He'd told Stephanie that her mother reminded him of Tuesday Weld. Stephanie couldn't see the resemblance, but one day when Mitchell was over, they got out her mother's old yearbooks and looked at pictures of her as a teenager. Then Stephanie got it: the bright blond hair, the delighted smile, the little nose and teddy-bear eyes. Her mother was a dream. Looking at those photos, Stephanie felt cheated. What happened to that buoyant girl? And at the same time she wanted nothing to do with that kind of femininity. It was no coincidence that Stephanie had decided to dye her hair after looking at those yearbooks, and no coincidence that she began to distance herself from her best friend, Bethany, who was on the junior varsity cheer squad and wore silk ruffled shirts and Red Door by Elizabeth Arden perfume and whose goal in high school—if not explicitly stated—was to like and be liked by absolutely everyone.

Her father, Sam, was in those photos, too. He seemed like a nice person. And also exactly the kind of guy she had grown weary of. She and Mitchell had a love-hate relationship with the football players at their school. They were so banal and clueless, so spoiled and doted upon, and yet physically, they were rather outstanding. There was one player in particular, Brett Albright, who was so attractive that Stephanie had to look away when she saw him in the hallway. He was always tanned, no matter what the season, and he wore his sandy-brown hair cut very short, almost a crew cut, which highlighted his sharp, grown-man's jaw. According to her father,

Brett was small for a football player, but Stephanie thought his body was perfect: his torso a classic inverted triangle, and his arms and legs thick with muscle—but not too thick. His only flaw was the oily patches of acne on his forehead and sideburn area, but even this seemed a piece of his masculinity. Once last spring he came to her house for dinner, and Stephanie spent the whole meal thinking of what it would be like to run her fingers along the stubble at the back of his neck. When she told Mitchell that later, he said he would have thought of running his fingers along something else.

Stephanie wondered if Mitchell had ever fooled around with any of the boys at her school. She thought not, because he would have told her, but then again, maybe he wouldn't have.

The one person she thought she knew best in the world, her own mother, had it within her to shorten a rope, fashion a slipknot, and climb a wooden stepladder. But Stephanie could not actually imagine that moment in her mother's life. And when Stephanie looked back on her childhood, she sometimes felt as if her mother had not really lived with their family at all, but instead had wandered in and out of their lives, like a visitor. It was as if they were on the road, and her mother was walking in a field beside the road, a wide field of tall grasses, or maybe corn, so that sometimes you got a glimpse of her, but mostly you did not see her, you could only sense her presence behind the screen of wild growth.

And yet even from this distance her mother was perceptive. It was her mother who had first noticed Mitchell's proclivities. "Well, he's different, isn't he?" was how she put it, after his first visit to their house. "Different how?" Stephanie asked. And as soon as the words were out of her mouth, the pieces

came together and she saw it, too: he liked boys, not girls. In that instant all of Stephanie's fantasies were blown away. She had thought she was in love. She had thought being in love was easy, like having a best friend.

Now it was funny to remember that she had ever thought Mitchell was straight. She had been so naive when she started high school, a lamb of a girl who believed her football-coach father was beyond reproach and that her mother's blue moods were normal, the price of motherhood. It was Mitchell who taught her to examine her family, to see them as an outsider might. The two of them had formed their own little unit of judgment. They practiced being smart together, training their newly acquired analytical skills on everyone, especially their families. They were both obsessed with their parents. Mitchell's father was a preacher who thought AIDS was a message from God. He had no idea his son was gay. Stephanie thought he had to have figured it out by Mitchell's senior year, when it was obvious that her and Mitchell's four-year friendship had never evolved into a romance; but on prom night, when she and Mitchell posed beneath the cherry tree in Mitchell's front yard, both of them wearing ragtag looks inspired by Courtney Love and Kurt Cobain, he made a remark about the importance of chastity. They had laughed hard about that, harder than they laughed when Stephanie's mother, upon seeing her ill-fitting baby doll dress said, in a completely befuddled and nonbitchy way, "Is it the style not to look pretty?"

"My mom thought you might be hungry." Mitchell stood in the doorway brandishing a pair of yellow-handled scissors. In his other hand was a plate of chocolate-chip blondies, cut into neat triangles.

Stephanie reached for one, though after months of front porch offerings, sweets no longer felt special. By some miracle, she had not gained a pound. It was working at the Red Byrd, she decided. Or maybe it was like people said: she was young, she could eat what she liked. Stephanie had always had a hard time remembering that she was young.

“All right, off with your dress,” Mitchell said. He tossed one of his T-shirts her way so she could cover up. Stephanie stepped behind his open closet door to change, realizing half-way through that her backside was reflected in Mitchell’s full-length mirror, which hung on the opposite door. But he wasn’t even looking! In moments like this Stephanie thought Mitchell’s mother must have some inkling of his sexuality. Why else would she let them stay up here by themselves for hours?

Mitchell flattened the dress across his desk and held it in place while she cut it. She didn’t bother to measure and mark it; she just let the sharp blades slide quietly through the fabric. She thought of her mother’s clothes on her father’s bed. She’d left them there on purpose, wanting him to be disturbed by their presence. *She* was disturbed by his weird suggestion that she take them with her to college. They weren’t even her style.

“That’s pretty short,” Mitchell said, examining the new hem.

To Stephanie’s oversensitive ears, this sounded like criticism, but she tried not to take it the wrong way. She wondered if Mitchell was sick of hanging out with her. She should have just gone to work. She liked waitressing because any awkwardness with customers or coworkers was dispelled by the fast pace of the dinner rush. And the exhaustion she felt at the end of the night was a satisfying distraction. Before she drove home she would sit out back with Jon and Becky, the line cooks, listening

as they bellyached over their shift drinks. Once she asked for a cigarette and they admonished her, telling her never to start, that it was the filthiest habit. And even though that had been annoying, she felt protected. They were constantly telling her she was “a strong young lady” and somehow that felt like an expectation that she had to fulfill. She found she liked having an expectation—or at least she liked it when it came from Jon and Becky, whose ideas about her were based on observation, rather than, say, her father’s stoic ideal.

She put the dress back on. The new hem hit midthigh, and it was jarring to see her mother’s dress so radically changed. As always, Stephanie thought her knees looked bony and overly large. Her father said they were *strong, athletic knees*, the kind that wouldn’t blow out. Everything came back to sports for him.

“Looks better now,” she said, pulling on her jean jacket. She put her hands in the pockets and found the half pack of cigarettes she’d scrounged from one of the booths. She held up the rumpled package. “Want one?”

Mitchell frowned, his long features turning dour. He had a haunted, thin face, one that had always reminded Stephanie of photos from the Civil War, the daguerreotypes of teenage soldiers. She remembered, with a twinge, the intensity of her old crush on him.

“You think you’re going to look like Marlene Dietrich with a ciggie in your hand? Please, you’re Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm.”

This time she was sure she wasn’t imagining the irritation in his voice. “Why are you being so mean?” she said. “All night long you’ve been acting like you don’t want me here.”

“Sorry, I’m just stressed,” he said. “I’m supposed to go to school next week and now my dad’s saying I can’t even bring my car. He’s still pissed I’m not going to Frostburg. I have to take the bus from Hagerstown. It’s going to take, like, ten hours.”

“You can’t take the bus to college! Let me drive you. My dad’s not coming with me. It would just be the two of us.”

“Your dad isn’t taking you?”

“It’s one of his double practice days. I mean, he offered, but I could tell he didn’t want to. And we would have had to take two cars with my brothers coming along and all my stuff. But there’s room for you.”

“I couldn’t. It doesn’t even make sense. Boston is so far out of your way.”

“So what? Come on, how much fun would we have?”

“No, it’s okay. I might not have to take the bus. My mom is looking into Amtrak. It will be good. I have too much shit anyway. Fresh start.”

“Yeah, I get it,” Stephanie said. But she was surprised that he would turn her down so quickly—surprised and hurt.

“So what are we going to do tonight?” Mitchell said.

“Sarah’s having a party,” Stephanie managed to say. It was dawning on her that Mitchell was really going to leave. She could see it now, she could imagine him waiting on a brick platform, wearing his long black coat and one of his mother’s crocheted caps, carrying his big duffel and maybe a backpack. And then he would board a silver train and be whisked up the Eastern Seaboard to Boston, a city full of students, a city full of people as smart as he was. He was just a few days from starting a whole new life. And she was happy for

him. But she was sad for herself. She no longer felt optimistic about leaving Willowboro. It felt like some other girl had decided to go to Swarthmore, and now she wasn't confident she could fulfill that girl's fancy private-school ambitions. She wasn't even sure that girl would ever return. If it was just a matter of keeping the ambitious girl's seat warm, of biding her time in sadness, in grief, then she could do that. But the more Stephanie thought about it, the more ludicrous that idea seemed. You couldn't "sub in" for yourself, waiting for some previous happiness to return. Because you would never forget the sad shit that went down. It got engraved onto your brain. Stephanie pictured her mother's brain, intricately engraved, like some Roman sarcophagus.

"I don't want to go to Sarah's," Mitchell said. "It's just going to be a bunch of football dudes. And everyone's probably already drunk by now. Let's go to the dollar theater."

"Not everyone will be drunk," Stephanie said. "Dan will be there. He doesn't drink."

"Because he's Mormon," Mitchell said.

"That's basically why you don't drink."

"I'm not Mormon!"

"No, but you come from a religious family."

"You think that's why I don't drink?" Mitchell asked. He seemed genuinely curious, open to the fact that he might not know himself as well as he thought. It was this sincerity that Stephanie had first noticed about Mitchell, even before she knew anything about him, when he was just an interesting-looking boy in her freshman geometry class, a boy who always finished his in-class assignments early and used the extra time to read the Jean M. Auel novels forbidden in his household.

“I don’t know,” Stephanie said. “Maybe you’ve absorbed certain puritanical attitudes.”

“Well, look at your family,” Mitchell said. “The attitudes you’ve *absorbed*. I mean, your dad?”

“What about him?”

“Um, hello? He basically presides over a kingdom of ’roided-up homophobes.”

“No one on my dad’s team uses steroids!” Stephanie wasn’t going to touch the homophobia. She and Mitchell had never talked about the fact that her father was obviously uncomfortable around him. They had never talked about it, because what was there to say?

“This isn’t even coming from me. You’re the one who’s been complaining. Didn’t you just tell me he was going to coach a practice instead of taking you to college?”

“One thing doesn’t have anything to do with the other,” Stephanie said, even though she was as hurt by her father as she was by Mitchell. Her mother hadn’t hurt her in this way; even at her most spaced out and distant, Stephanie always felt her mother was with her in spirit.

“Hey, what’s the matter?” Mitchell said. “Your dress doesn’t look that bad.”

“I’m just sad because we’re leaving in a week, you know? I don’t want to say good-bye.”

“You say it like I’m dying!” Mitchell joked. And then realized his mistake. “Oh, God. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Stephanie said. The problem was that Mitchell was excited to go away to college and she wasn’t, and he knew she wasn’t, and he’d been trying to conceal his own excitement out of courtesy, but now he was getting tired

of hiding his true feelings. And Stephanie felt guilty, but at the same time, she felt jealous, because it was like Mitchell got to go away to school and assume some fabulous new identity while she became—what? She didn't know. And it scared her that she didn't know, and it scared her that she didn't know if this rift between them—if that's what it was—was occurring because they were naturally growing apart, or if it had to do with her mother's death. She couldn't see her life clearly anymore, and clarity was the most important thing to her; it was her secret power. Her mother had taken that from her.

"Let's just go to the party," Mitchell said. "You can smoke your filched ciggies, and I'll have pretzels and lemonade with Dan. It'll be positively thrilling for all involved."

"Don't do me any favors," Stephanie said. "I can go by myself."

"No, no, no," Mitchell said, shaking his finger. "Friends don't let friends go to the suburbs by themselves. If worse comes to worst, we can always *cruise the dual*."

"Cruising the dual" meant driving on the dual highway outside of town, driving but never exiting, just going around and around in circles and taking in the sights of the commercial strip. It was a "classic" Willowboro activity, so classic that Stephanie and Mitchell had never bothered to try it, although they'd always said they would do it before they left for college. Tonight would be the perfect night to give it a whirl—or it *would* be the perfect night, if only Stephanie could be the girl she used to be, the impatient overachiever who liked nothing better than to view her hometown from a certain ironic distance.

DEAN COULD TELL from the way Stephanie moved that she'd been drinking; she'd lost her specificity, all the micromovements and small gestures that made her special to him. Her dark hair was in a low ponytail at the nape of her neck, with a few long strands left loose. She came in through the side door and headed straight to the refrigerator for a glass of orange juice.

"Stephanie," he said quietly, so she wouldn't startle. He was sitting at the kitchen table, waiting.

"Dad!" She turned around, surprising him with a warm smile—an intoxicated smile, but still.

"Late night at the Red Byrd?"

"Yeah, and then I went out." She sat down at the table to drink her juice. "Sorry, I should have called. I feel bad, you waited up."

Her lie was so transparent that he was reminded of the fibs she told when she was a little girl, how obvious they were, and how stubbornly she clung to them. Lying, in small children, was a sign of intelligence.

"Steph, the boys and I went to the Red Byrd for dinner."

"You came to check up on me?"

"I wanted to see you," Dean said. "And the boys did, too. You left them alone."

"It was only for, like, fifteen minutes."

"They're little kids."

"I'm sorry." She got up and poured herself some more juice. "Mitchell called and he really needed me to come over—he's going through a hard time—so I got Katie to cover my shift. And I didn't tell you because I didn't want it to be some big thing. But I had to go, he's my best friend."

It bugged Dean that Mitchell was her designated “best friend.” Why couldn’t she be best friends with another girl, a typical girl, a girl who was happy, who didn’t view high school as one big hard time?

“How much have you had to drink?” Dean asked.

“I wasn’t driving,” she said. “Mitchell dropped me off.”

“So where’s your car?”

“It’s parked at Sarah Auerbach’s. She had a party, okay?”

He noticed now that she was dressed up, wearing a flowered sundress. It was the kind of modest, feminine dress Dean preferred for her to wear—or would have been, if Stephanie hadn’t cut it short, leaving the edges ragged.

“Is that one of your mother’s dresses?”

“Yeah.” Stephanie tugged at the hem of her skirt, pulling on a loose thread. “It’s not like Mom cares. She’s gone. The dead don’t care, that’s what Mitchell says.”

Robbie’s phrase, *dead-lady clothes*, came into Dean’s mind. Along with Robbie and his flushed cheeks, Nic’s pale blue dress.

“I don’t care what Mitchell has to say,” Dean said.

“You’ve always been hostile toward him. What’s that about? He’s really smart. He’s probably the smartest person I’ve ever met. Just because he doesn’t care about football doesn’t mean he’s not worth your time.”

“Steph, I don’t want to talk about your friend right now.”

“I’m just trying to have a conversation,” she said, slurring as she navigated *conversation*’s four syllables. “But if you just want to walk around all stoic, that’s fine, we can pretend everything’s okay. Just like we did with Mom.”

“That’s something, coming from the girl who barely spoke to her mother for a year.”

Stephanie got up and put her juice glass in the sink. She stood there and Dean could tell by the way her shoulders were hunched forward that she had begun to cry. It had been so long since he had seen her cry that he was almost heartened by her tears, by their intimacy. But then, seeing her pale face reflected in the darkened window above the sink, he felt as if she had eluded him yet again, as if the cheerful girl he had once known—the girl he hoped would be restored to him at the end of adolescence—had been displaced by this ghost of a girl.

“Sweetheart, I’m sorry, I’ve had a rough day. I lost one of my best players, a linebacker, and we don’t have a good replacement. I have to rethink everything.”

“That sounds pretty stressful,” she said drily.

“I’m sure it doesn’t seem like a big deal to you, but if you knew about football—”

“I *know* about football. I just don’t find it especially interesting.”

Dean turned away to gather up his notes, as well as Garrett’s. He was tired; his eyelids burned. He couldn’t understand why his kids were giving him so much grief. He wasn’t the one who’d left them.

“Where is it written that I have to like football?” Stephanie said.

He faced her again. “Look, I don’t expect you to care about the holes in my playbook, I really don’t. But I *do* expect you to give a shit about your younger brothers, who really need you right now.”

“I’m so sick of this. I go out, I let loose for one night, and you make me feel guilty. I’ve been babysitting them all summer long.” Stephanie swiped at her eyes, smearing her already smudged makeup. “Aunt Joelle says I’m the one holding this family together.”

“Don’t bring Joelle into this.”

“Why shouldn’t I? You’re just going to dump Robbie and Bry on her when I leave.”

“I’m working on getting a sitter,” Dean said, straining to keep his voice even. “I was going to ask around at church tomorrow. I was hoping you’d come with me.”

“I’m supposed to help with Aunt Joelle’s barbecue.”

“So am I. We can go after.”

“I thought you didn’t want to go.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m not going.”

He matched her stubborn gaze. She didn’t like church; he didn’t like Joelle. He had her in a bind. She couldn’t say no without making him look like a better person.

“Fine, I’ll go.”

She turned the lights off as she left the kitchen—out of habit or spite, Dean couldn’t tell. The darkness was a relief. Cool air came through the window above the sink, a hint of autumn. It was something Dean noticed every August, that unexpected hint of crispness, like a pocket of cold water in a sun-warmed lake. Dean had met Nicole in August, just a few weeks after he’d moved to Willowboro. He’d gone to the country club to inquire about membership, and she had been at the front desk. The club was in the midst of a renovation; it was being changed from a small, family-run golf course to an “outdoor recreation facility” with a pool, tennis courts, driv-

ing range, and, for the winter months, a small gym with racquetball courts and a sauna. With her fresh, makeup-free face and her optimistic smile (a willed optimism, Dean realized now), Nicole seemed a part of that transformation. She seemed like the future of this new place that he had moved to. Later he told people that he knew he wanted to marry her at first sight, because that was what people said about their brides, but the truth was, his wish on that night was just to be near her again. It was unbelievable to him that she was single; later he learned that everyone still thought of her as Sam's girl. People warned him to be careful, that she was on the rebound. She came to every game; she knew about football. Dean didn't care how she'd learned it. All that mattered was that she seemed happy when she was with him. She had been so sad when they met; she had been sad and he had made her happy. Dean couldn't understand why he was never able to do it again.