

Flamingo Moon

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PROLOGUE

MAYBE I WAS doomed right from the start, born with LOSER already written on my little baby forehead, thanks to Vivian, who clearly wasn't cut out for motherhood. My mom was so busy screwing up her own life that she didn't have time to look out for mine. But I can't blame her for everything. I'm the one who took that beginning and went on to make an epic mess of my life. Though God knows it could have been worse: if Vivian had raised me on her own I'd have been snatched up by Child Protective Services. It's a good thing she had help.

Rose helped her. Rose in her dumpy little El Cerrito bar and motel on San Pablo Avenue, tucked between A-1 Smog Testers and the Korean burrito shop. For years Rose tended the bar at The Last Stop while keeping an eye on the door to the Welcome Back Motel. When a traveler came into the tiny motel foyer, she just stepped through the door that connected the motel to the back of the bar, and there she was, at the motel's front desk. It was typical of Rose to lay things out so that she could take as few steps as possible; she weighed something like three hundred pounds and the only exercise she ever got was to climb the stairs to her little apartment over the Last Stop. Huffing and puffing and leaning on the railing.

That's where she assembled herself a family. Rose, as Vivian liked to say when she got eloquent after a few beers, was a plus-sized woman with a heart so big she had room to spare for two pregnant losers who wandered into the Last Stop. Vivian being one of those two losers. The way she told it, she had been going through a rough patch anyway, but when she found herself pregnant with me, she fell apart. She went on a two-week Smirnoff bender, got fired from her job as a payroll clerk at Clorox, and could no longer afford to pay her rent. Rose put her up in a room at the Welcome Back Motel—gave it to her for free—and that's where we lived for the first four years of my life.

According to Vivian's story, Bobbie was the other pregnant loser who walked into the bar. But Bobbie wasn't a loser. It's true that she was pregnant with Franny and had lost her job as an exotic dancer, but when she told the story herself she always liked to say that just as she was looking to reinvent herself, she found a brand-new life at the Last Stop. I guess while she was hanging out there she and Rose must have fallen in love, because Bobbie moved in with Rose in her apartment over the bar, and she's been there ever since.

As a result, when Franny and I came into the world we were surrounded by something already resembling a family. I'm using the term loosely. It's not like we were actually related to each other. And strictly speaking, we didn't all live together all the time. But as irregular as things were, we always had Rose there trying to make our lives as normal as possible. She was the sun and the rest of us were the planets, going about our business around her and turning to her for light. Of course by the time Franny and I were old enough to be in school we knew this setup wasn't conventional, so we told everyone we were cousins.

In this lovely family story there is one thing missing. I'll point it out in case you haven't already noticed. There is no sign of anything like a father here. Not a man in sight. Just Vivian's friend Dieter, who dated her years ago and has been hanging around ever since. The token man in our lives. Franny has an actual dad she visits sometimes, but all I ever had was Dieter. A sweet man, but a stand-in just the same.

Dieter was born in Germany, but he came here as a little kid when his mother married an American. She died when he was a teenager, and he didn't get along with his stepdad, so he didn't have much in the way of family. I guess that's one reason he continued to hang around us. We had become his family. That and the fact that he still had a soft spot for my mom. So as it turned out, through the years he was the only guy who stuck around while the rest of my mom's boyfriends came and went. Fortunately Dieter came to his senses and stopped dating her years ago or he'd have been long gone by now as well.

Sometimes I wonder how different my life would be if I had grown up in a normal family. Would I be listening today to a chorus of *Honey Barkin, for the love of God, how could you end up in such a mess?* That's what they're all asking, and because I don't have an answer for them I'm taking a long hard look at my life. Kind of like Hansel and Gretel hoping to stumble their way home by following a trail of crumbs, I'm trying to follow my path back to the beginning. And maybe the beginning was my hot rush to get out of there. To be with Danny.

Chapter 1

THE FIRST TIME I ever saw Danny Gonzales was in November of our senior year. He had just transferred to our high school, and showed up at the beginning of Spanish class because he needed a signature or something from the teacher. After a few words with Mr. Pascal he stood there in front of the class, his hands on his hips, turning to grin at us, completely at ease, while Mr. Pascal read whatever it was Danny gave him and then bent down to his desk to sign it. You know the expression “tall, dark, and handsome”? That was Danny. Well, okay, except that he wasn’t tall. In fact, he was on the short side. But he was definitely handsome, and beautifully dark. His hair and eyes were almost black, and his skin was smooth and golden brown. He was slender and graceful, and supremely confident. By the time Mr. Pascal finished that paperwork, I had noticed all this and more, so you can imagine how I felt when Mr. Pascal nodded toward an empty seat and Danny sauntered over and dropped into it.

That was the beginning of my watching phase. All through class I would watch him. I was sitting behind him, in the next row, so I was able to stare at him without his being aware of it. Sometimes he looked like he was asleep. I don’t know if he really was, because I couldn’t see his eyes from where I sat. What I could see was how his hair curled a little on the nape of his neck, and how his elbows were rough and grayish compared with the rich brown of the skin on his arms. I could see that he had a scar on his thumb, just a little nick, but white and shaped like a *V*.

I began to see him everywhere and I couldn’t help but notice that he was hanging out a lot with a girl in our class named Brianna. Now, I’m not saying I was sitting around mooning over Danny. But I was keeping an eye on him. For the longest time I had to watch him from a distance because he was with that Brianna girl. Now school had actually become interesting. So much so that I was disappointed when suddenly it was Thanksgiving break. I thought I was going to go crazy because I didn’t have him to watch. And then the day after Thanksgiving when Franny and I went to a movie, there he was behind the candy counter. So we saw a couple more movies over the weekend, and when I came in with Franny and my friends, he slipped me a box of Junior Mints no charge when his boss wasn’t looking, because he knew that was my favorite movie candy.

Then school started again, and suddenly Brianna was out of the picture. On Friday night when I went to the movies with my friends, he came out from behind the counter as we were leaving and said to me, “I’m off. Wanna hang out?” I just turned to the others and said “Bye, bye,” and we were out of there. We went to his house. His mom was out on a date and his sister was at a sleepover, so no one was home. Finally I had Danny to myself. We made out on his living room couch, and I felt like I was on fire. I wondered if it was like this for my mom with her boyfriends, and that was an odd thing to think about.

I asked him about Brianna, and he said they weren’t going out anymore, but he wouldn’t say more than that, no matter which way I brought the subject up. But I didn’t really care. I was the winner. I felt like I’d won the lottery of love. We started going to

his house after school to goof around. His mom, Erin, was usually around then because she was a nurse and went to work at five-thirty in the morning so she could be back when her kids got home from school. So it was a little awkward, as Erin would try to be nice and offer me something to eat or drink, and ask me how school was, and I tried to be polite and think of an answer that was different from the day before. Danny and I ducked away as soon as we could and headed for the living room to watch TV. We could hear her walking around the house, doing the laundry, answering the phone, yelling at the dog to stop barking, clanking pots and pans together in the kitchen. We were waiting for her to go pick up his sister at school and do her various errands. Thank God for all those things that needed doing. Getting groceries. Going to the cleaners. Going to the library to return books. Dropping his sister at her Girl Scout meetings. We were so grateful for all these mundane tasks. Because the moment Erin walked out the door we were on each other.

Danny knew all there was to know about sex. When he was eleven he had found a book in his dad's bookcase that was an honest-to-goodness sex how-to manual. Naturally he read that thing cover to cover. More than once. I mean he had been studying it for years, so by the time I came along he practically had a PhD in sex. Of course he showed me the book.

Sex was something I already knew a bit about. In High School a group of us would hang out after school together. It was like a club. And although my friend Madison was popular—she was not as pretty as I was, but she had a lot of confidence, and she was funny, so that went a long way—I was the queen. I was pretty much the hottest girl in school, so all the boys were attracted to me, and they all wanted me to like them. They wanted to be chosen. Because from where we hung out at the end of the field, behind the storage building, there was always the possibility that I would go under the bleachers with one of them to make out.

I didn't go under the bleachers with just anybody, and I didn't go all the way, either. It always started with kissing and a fair amount of touching, but if I particularly liked the boy, I went a step further. It was a great moment, and it gave me such a feeling of power. I would sit up, arch my back as I peeled off my shirt, and then, ta-dah, unhook my bra. I was wearing a D cup by then, so this was a big moment. And the reaction was the same every time. As my breasts bounced free, a worshipful expression came over the boy's face; he almost swooned with gratitude and lust. I would let him bury his face in my chest, and to kiss and touch my breasts, which I really liked, but I never let any of them pull my panties down. It was okay to rub me through the panties, but no reaching inside. I was not a slut. The boys were happy with my rules, because they really liked my breasts. In fact, they got so excited by them that they would pretty much do anything for me.

Bobbie told me that when boys get a hard-on it drains all the blood from their brains. I don't know if that's true, but when I'm with a guy and I feel that thing getting bigger and bigger, I have to wonder what it's like for him. Can he think about anything at all with all that going on down there? Probably not.

I loved touching Danny. His skin was so smooth and dark, and his stomach so flat, with a soft line of hair pointing to his navel, which I loved to kiss, like I loved to kiss his thumb with its little white nick, and all the other landmarks as I traveled over his body. His hair was as soft and silky as a baby's, and I ran my fingers through it

whenever his face was buried in my breasts. His dark eyes were heavy-lidded and sleepy-looking when he was with me, and they would close as I took his penis in my hand, to feel it grow magically even harder.

It wasn't long before we had progressed to feverishly pulling our clothes off the minute his mother walked out the door, getting right to it, all breathless and sweaty, rubbing each other all over and working up to where even our pores were throbbing. But we were afraid I'd get pregnant if he came inside me, so we pretty much did everything but that. Then when we heard Erin's car pull into the driveway we had to frantically pull our clothes back on, laughing and snorting, sitting up to pretend we were watching the TV we had left on. I'm amazed Erin never noticed that my hair was a mess, and my lips were puffy and my chin was red from all the rubbing that went on.

One day I couldn't stand it any longer. It was time for birth control pills. I went to my mom when I knew she had already had a couple of beers and was feeling particularly mellow, and told her that the school counselor had recommended birth control pills for my skin. I did have the occasional zit, and she bought it. She made me an appointment at the clinic and that's all there was to it. I was covered. That's when Danny and I really got into it, big-time. We were all over each other, sucking and licking and rubbing, and then I could finally take him inside me, and we would explode with the spasms and spurts of orgasm.

Birth control made me think of my phantom dad. Did he and my mom use birth control? I had to wonder if I had been planned, like they had thought they were going to stay together forever, or if I was just an accident. Knowing my mom it was probably an accident. But she would never tell me. When I asked, she just said, "You are lucky to have a happy home. It wouldn't be if he and I had stayed together." That's all. End of story.

I'm not sure about that happy home part. By the time I was in High School her so-called happy home was driving me crazy.

It was around this time that Danny sort of moved things to the next level. It was always when he had a few drinks in him. He would tell everyone in the room that I was his angel, and that I was the perfect woman, the best thing that ever happened to him. This was sweet, although it was a little embarrassing when he laid it on really thick. Then he would announce that we were going to get married. The first time he did this I wondered if it was the booze talking, and I asked him the next day if he meant it. He got all evasive and said he didn't remember saying it, but he quickly added, "Not that I don't think it's a good idea." But we agreed that maybe it was a little early to be talking about that. I mean, we were still in high school. What was he thinking? Secretly, though, it made me feel good.

This went on for months, with Danny bringing marriage up every time he had anything to drink. His friend Ryan would say, "Hey, dude, why get married?" and Danny would say, "Look at her. She's gorgeous, dude, she's a fucking angel. And that angel is going to be my wife. Mine, all mine." And Ryan and Matthew would say, "That's awesome," and then they would talk about football.

When he did this in front of my family it created a sensation. We were all at Rose's for dinner. After a couple of beers Danny started in. "Honey is my sweet angel,"

he rhapsodized, “and I’m going to marry her and take care of her forever.” Rose said, “Son, you need to slow down on that beer there. Here, have a cup of coffee.” Vivian was just as hammered as Danny was, and feeling sentimental, she began to weep, whining, “My little baby is all grown up.” Meanwhile Bobbie chirped, “Can I help you plan the wedding?” And Franny just rolled her eyes, muttering, “Prince Charming rides again.” You could always count on Franny for sarcasm. She liked to remind us that she wasn’t going to miss the family freak show when she went away to college.

Of course Dieter weighed in too with his doubts. “Honey, you are both just kids. Don’t rush into anything. Grow up, have a good time, don’t settle down until you’re older.” I tried to tell him that it wasn’t my idea, that this was the beer talking, but Dieter wouldn’t stop worrying. So now there was all the more for them to interfere with. Me, I didn’t care if we got married or not. I just wanted to get out of the house, and I liked hearing Danny talk like that about me.

When we graduated Rose threw us a big party. We didn’t get fancy Tiffany bracelets like some of the other girls, but the three moms got together to give us each a set of suitcases with little wheels: one big suitcase, one small one, and a matching tote bag. My set was powder blue with white welting, and Franny’s was red. Bobbie picked them out and Rose paid for them, and Vivian got a free ride. Typical. Dieter gave us each an iPod speaker. Bobbie’s friends—who Vivian dubbed The FOBs, for Friends of Bobbie—all got together and gave Franny a beautiful red satin quilt for her college dorm room. Notice there were no Friends of Vivian to get together on a nice gift for me. Franny also got a gift from her dad Barry—a watch with a tan leather band. Again, no dad to give me a watch. Vivian just said, “Oh, get over it” when I brought this up.

I guess I shouldn’t complain, especially since the graduation as a whole went so well and for once Vivian didn’t make a spectacle of herself. This was just the sort of occasion that she was likely to screw up. But she got through the ceremony without doing anything wildly inappropriate. Strictly speaking she wasn’t exactly sober, but with Rose on one side and Dieter on the other, she wasn’t allowed to do anything embarrassing.

The problem with graduation was that it marked the end of the first stage of our lives. Though the ending wasn’t the problem. The problem was the question it raised. Because graduation raised the question: *what next?* College in the fall was not in my plans. I had no plans. I once thought I wanted to be a veterinarian because I loved Bobbie’s dog Muppet, but when I was in high school Rose pointed out that to be one I would have to improve my math grades. I began to see that maybe I wasn’t cut out for that career, and by the time I graduated I pretty much had no idea what I was going to do with myself. With one exception: I planned to get out on my own. Other than that I was flexible.

More and more of my time was spent at Danny’s now. I didn’t have Franny to hang with because she was spending all her time with her boyfriend, Colin the Weasel. That wasn’t his real name, that’s just what I called him to make Franny crazy. His real name was Colin Weaser. He was a good student just like Franny. They both got into fancy colleges. Excuse me, Universities. Franny to the University of California at Davis, and Colin to the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. The two of them

were obsessed with their plans: for college in the fall, for careers in four years, for raging success after that. Whenever I was with them I had to hear this crap. Just listening to them I figured I may as well kill myself now because frankly I was never going to be their kind of success.

“So what are you going to do?” Franny asked me more than once. She was so cocksure because she had a freakin’ plan. I couldn’t see why I should have to follow right in her footsteps. College sounded like a lot of work. My preference was to get out in the real world. I figured I’d get a job, then get a place of my own, and I’d be out of that house forever. But everyone wanted to know exactly how I was planning to do that. Especially Rose. She thought my plan should include school. She kept talking about classes at the community college, and pointing out that Madison was going to go there. Only my mom stood up for me. “Honey is going to do fine,” she’d say. “Not everyone has to be a college hot shot.” Then I’d slip out of the room while she and Rose got into it about how low expectations just lead to mediocre results (Rose) and how no one should force a child be something she wasn’t cut out to be (Vivian). They had this argument at least once a week. Over and over Vivian said, “College isn’t for everyone” and “You don’t learn everything from books.” She had gone to college, but as she liked to point out, it hadn’t done much for her. She had a job doing payroll and accounting for some architects but she didn’t need college for that. And there were plenty of times in her life when she wasn’t doing much of anything. So much for college, as far as I was concerned. Bobbie tried to stay clear of these discussions, but inevitably she would say something vague, like “Honey just needs some direction,” that usually got the argument rolling again.

Even Dieter weighed in to ask me about my plan. One day he came by after he’d stopped in at the bar, and I was sitting on the back porch, in the evening sun, brushing bright pink nail polish on my toes. Dieter always smelled good, with just a little whiff of nutmeg that maybe came from his aftershave, and when he sat down beside me I could smell that, plus his breath, which was a little beery now. “Hey, babe,” he said.

“Hey,” I answered, concentrating on my toes. If you didn’t brush carefully in three strokes—left side, right side, then one down the middle—the nail would look sloppy.

“So,” he said, “now you’ve graduated. Do you know what you want to do?”

So now he was joining the crowd. I was beginning to appreciate the days when all their focus had been on Franny and her full-court press for college. “I guess I’ll get a job.”

He was quiet for a while. Then he said “What kind of job?” and now I was getting exasperated.

“I don’t know. I’ll have to see what’s out there.”

Dieter just sighed. I could tell he wanted to be helpful but he didn’t know what to say. But the way I saw it, if he wanted to be helpful, he should tell me what to do. That would be helpful.

Danny had decided not to go to college right away. He had been accepted to the University of California at Santa Cruz, but he figured he’d defer it for a year. So right after graduation he got himself a second job, working afternoons in a pet-supply store,

which was perfect for him because he loved animals. His next project was to move out of his mom's house and into a place of his own here in El Cerrito. I guess she was fine with that, because it was her cousin Martin who became Danny's new landlord. Martin was an old guy with a gray ponytail and one gold earring who went around buying decrepit houses that were practically falling down. Then he flipped them. His word. Cracked me up. It made houses sound like pancakes. He worked on them and fixed them up and the idea was he'd make a killing on them when they were sold. I don't think Martin ever made a killing on anything in his life, but he got by, and he liked messing around with wood and drywall, so it was probably as good a way as any to make a living. He had picked up a pathetic little dump on Liberty Street that needed a lot of fixing and agreed to give Danny a sweet deal on the rent if he gave him a hand with the work. As Dieter pointed out, Martin was able to have access to the place to work on it at the same time that he was renting it out, so it was a pretty good deal for everyone. The only downside to it, from Danny's perspective, was that Danny wanted a dog and Martin had a no-dog policy, which he said was nonnegotiable.

The house was tiny, and it needed just about everything you could think of. The floors and walls were dirty and stained. The kitchen and bathroom tile was chipped and the grout was black with age. And someone had written about fifty phone numbers in smudgy pencil right on the wall next to the phone. When you picked up the phone there was no dial tone. No one uses landlines any more, so who knows how long ago those numbers were scribbled on the wall. They made the kitchen look even dirtier. But the place was sunny and bright, and there was still some furniture left behind by the previous tenants, so Danny and I were pretty excited by it all.

For the move Dieter let us use his truck, and I helped Danny move his stuff to the house. There wasn't much. He had a black trash bag full of clothes and shoes, and a basketball. He had an old TV that his dad, Ray, had picked up at a garage sale. And he had another trash bag full of sheets and towels that his mom gave him. She also gave him a frying pan and a can opener, and she made some wisecrack about how that's all he needed to prepare his meals. We looked around the kitchen and realized he needed a lot more. Like a sponge to wipe the filthy counter, and soap, and paper towels, and plates and forks, all those things that you use every day without even thinking about it. So we went to Target and had a blast rolling a cart down the aisles, picking things out. Ray had given Danny some money to buy what he needed, but when Danny pulled the shopping cart over and began to add it all up, we were shocked to realize that we didn't have enough to even cover part of it. So we began to pull things out. First the coffeemaker; he could buy coffee on the way to work. Then the garbage can; he could always use a paper bag for garbage. Pretty soon we had pulled out most of the contents of the cart. In the end all we bought there were some paper towels and two sponges, toilet paper and a basketball hoop. Then we drove over to the St. Vincent de Paul Thrift Shop to get dishes and silverware and another pan.

When we brought everything back to the house and put the things away, I began to scrub the counters and the filthy refrigerator, while Danny attached the basketball hoop to the front of the garage using tools that Martin kept on the back porch. It felt so cozy, the two of us there setting up the house, as if we were married. Unfortunately Danny had told his friends Ryan and Matthew that they could stay there for a few days if they brought groceries, so eventually they showed up, plunked a couple of bags down on the

counter, and headed straight outside to try out the basketball hoop. I took everything out of the bags. There was cereal, milk, hot dogs, beer, chips, the works. They had thought of everything. And I was like the mom in the kitchen, putting it away. It made me feel important. I know this sounds dumb, but it made me feel grown-up.

Rose had become more and more annoying to be around. Just watching her slowly fold the laundry put me on edge. I knew that any minute she would launch into a lecture. She would pick up a pillowcase, snap it in the air, fold it in half against her enormous belly, and then freeze there and look at me. “Torie,” she’d start, and then I knew she’d be off and running, droning on about how important it was to have a plan.

Rose was the only person who called me Torie, which was short for my real name, Victoria. One day when I was an infant my mom slapped her forehead and said, “Victoria! Jeez, what was I thinking! What kind of chemical imbalance made me name a baby after my mom?” Rose suggested she shorten the name to Vickie, but Vivian said she hated that name. Then Rose suggested Torie. Vivian said she had never heard of anyone called Torie, but she’d think about it, but I don’t think she actually gave it any consideration. Since she was already in the habit of calling me Honey, she just slipped into using it more and more like a name, and it wasn’t long before everyone was calling me Honey. Everyone except Rose, who persisted in calling me Torie, because, as she liked to point out, for Honey to be an appropriate name for me I’d have to be a cocker spaniel. Finally though, when I got to be about three years old, I began to correct her, and she finally caved and called me Honey like everyone else did. But in High School she started with Torie again.

“Torie, sweetheart, you just graduated from high school and you don’t even have a plan.” I knew what her next sentence would be. It would be Franny. “Frances is going to college. She’s working hard to ensure a good future.” Fabulous Frances. Didn’t Rose know that Franny didn’t intend to come back home, ever, even for vacations? She didn’t want any part of our crazy family.

I didn’t either. I had pretty much had it with all of them. Rose, Bobbie, Dieter, and most of all my mom. And all the drama that went along with her boyfriends. I just wanted it all to go away. Vivian’s latest boyfriend was some guy named Kevin who thought he was Brad Pitt. When he looked in the mirror he probably couldn’t see the little bald spot on the back of his head. Kevin was an architect, and his claim to fame was some house he had designed, all glass and steel and bare surfaces, that was written up in *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine, and of course we were all supposed to ooh and ahh over that. But that was past history, and lately things had become a little sketchy for him and he needed a place to live, so for the moment he was housesitting for a San Francisco client who had been incarcerated for embezzlement. Those were Kevin’s words: “incarcerated for embezzlement.” He couldn’t just say the jerk was in jail for stealing from his boss. So Kevin was house-sitting for the guy until he got out on parole, and Vivian was spending more of her time over there with him. Kind of like me at Danny’s, only the house in San Francisco was a lot more glamorous. But Danny didn’t have a bald spot.

Vivian wasn’t all that happy about hauling her ass over to San Francisco all the time for this Kevin, but he made it clear he didn’t care much for her family so he usually

refused to come over to her place. She constantly bitched and moaned about that and we all had to listen to her. You'd think from all her whining that she'd look at this as a deal-breaker, but instead she just complained and went along with it, and then, about half the time, in some twisted kind of passive aggressive payback, she'd refuse to stay overnight there. Like I said, it was a lot of drama.

When I was a little kid most of Vivian's boyfriends tried to be nice to me in order to impress her. Some of them brought me treats thinking that was a good way to rack up points with her. It was usually something like a Kit Kat bar, or a bag of M&M's. But once in a while it was more substantial, like a small plush dog, or a Hello Kitty notebook. Some of the boyfriends gave things to Franny too, because she was at our place so often. And I have to say a couple of them really went out of their way to be nice to us.

One was the chubby bald guy who would take us in his truck to get ice cream. I always wanted to touch his smooth, tanned head, but I never did. I was sorry when he and my mom split up. There was the one that Bobbie dubbed the Cowboy, a wiry guy who wore jeans no matter what the occasion and talked with a drawl. He brought Franny and me along with them when they went out for pizza. He thought he was a comedian, but we didn't think he was all that funny.

Then there was Yoga Dan. Bobbie had been taking yoga for a while, and she kept urging Vivian to come with her. "You'd like it, it's relaxing," she kept saying, and finally Vivian agreed to give it a shot during a time when she had sworn off drinking and was making a big show of starting healthy activities. "It was hilarious," she said later. "There's this thing called downward dog, where the whole class is bent over with their butts in the air, and jeez, someone farted. I nearly choked trying not to laugh out loud." Still, she kept going back, and pretty soon it was apparent that her tremendous interest in yoga was because of Yoga Dan. He was lean and buff, and he treated Vivian nicely, but he didn't have much rapport with kids, and we got tired of his enthusiasm for things we weren't remotely interested in. He tried to get us all to go vegetarian, which Bobbie was all for trying, but Rose said no way. On the other hand, he talked Vivian into getting a nicotine patch, which was good, but she was still sneaking cigarettes when he wasn't around. Eventually Vivian went back to drinking again, and of course Yoga Dan didn't like that one bit, and they fought about it. He was a very serious person, and if you're having a relationship with Vivian while she's drinking, you don't want to be too serious.

Before I was born there had been a wacko boyfriend. Franny and I loved to ask Bobbie about him. Right after my mom split up with him he murdered his ex-wife. Seriously. A murderer. How many people actually date a murderer? Bobbie said it was a good thing Vivian split up with him, or who knows, she might have been the one who got bopped on the head. We loved this story, it was so lurid, but Rose said we shouldn't talk about it. And Vivian clammed up completely whenever anyone brought it up, and got surly when we pestered her for details. I can't blame her. She probably felt embarrassed that she had gone out with such a loser. No one wants to be reminded of their bad choices, and Lord knows Vivian probably had a shitload of stuff she didn't want to be reminded of.

It was around this time that Vivian decided she needed to be a better mom. When she wasn't at Kevin's, she began to hover over me. When she got home and found me still

awake she would come into my room, the ice clinking in her glass, slide my stuff to one side and plop down on my bed. She'd kick off her shoes and pull up her feet to sit cross-legged, and then she'd light a cigarette. She wanted to get chummy. She wanted to know how I felt about things: about Danny, about her and her boyfriends, about all my so-called plans for the future. Basically she was looking for heart to heart talks. When she was really hammered, she'd get maudlin about us, saying that she had failed me, and that she was going to make it up to me. Other times she went on and on about how we were so close we were like sisters. It got so I turned out the light when I heard her noisy car come rattling up the street, so that she would think I was asleep and wouldn't come in to talk.

I didn't know what I wanted to do with myself, but I did know two things. I needed to get out of there. And I didn't want to turn out like Vivian.

Big Jeff, the other bartender at the Last Stop, told Bobbie that Vivian was coming in after the lunch rush for an afternoon bump. You could tell that she was drinking more because she was crabby and looked puffy and tired. And she was starting to talk to herself. About me, right in front of me, when I was in the same room. "Honey had better get it together," she would mumble, shaking her head. Where did she think I was? In the next county?

One night Danny was over for dinner, and she had a big heat on, and went on and on about something she had heard someone say, that life is a temporary condition. This really made a big impression on her, like it was something really cool and philosophical. Maybe it was, but after about the fortieth telling that cool philosophical quality kind of loses its luster. There was no shutting her up when she got going like this. Most of what she said that night made no sense whatsoever. I was sorry Danny had to see this side of her.

Meanwhile Dieter's girlfriend moved to Florida to take care of her mother, who had Alzheimer's, so he began hanging around like a lost dog. He had taken to showing up after his evening beer at the Last Stop, just in time to join us for dinner. It became so regular that he started bringing something, usually a take-out salad from the deli, to contribute to the meal. I loved Dieter, but he was bringing the mood way down at dinner.

And if I ever forgot that I was in a real loony bin, all I had to do was think of the day I saw Bobbie in her bedroom with an electric hair straightener in one hand, pretending it was a mike, while she did her dance moves, singing to the mirror and to her dog Muppet, who lay on her bed and watched. Forty-two years old and she was singing into a hair appliance for a dog. All I could think was I really needed to get away.

So moving in with Danny seemed like a no-brainer. I was at his place most of the time anyway, and Danny was fine with the idea. One afternoon I packed all my clothes and things into my two powder blue suitcases and matching tote bag, and put everything else into a cardboard box. Danny had a car by that time, and we loaded it with all my stuff and hauled it over to his house. He wasn't using his closet because he didn't like to be bothered with hanging things on hangers. In fact he had never unpacked his clothes from the black plastic trash bag. So I had the whole closet for my things.

I looked at him stretched out on the bed, watching me put clothes on hangers, his shirt unbuttoned, his flip-flops kicked off. I couldn't believe how lucky I was. I was

living with a guy who was hot enough to be in an underwear ad. Really, he was. And he was mine. Mine to touch, to smell, to feel wrapped around me, to watch as he went about the house unaware that I was watching him. I wondered why I hadn't moved in before this.

That night we broke the news of my move to Vivian, but she was getting ready to go out with Kevin, and I could tell she wasn't focused, and when I told her I had moved in with Danny, she didn't really react. Then after a few minutes she said, "Well, okay. So what kind of job are you going to get?"

Everyone kept coming back to that. I told her I was looking for one. That wasn't strictly true, because I hadn't started looking, but I intended to, which I figured was the same thing. But I was a little disappointed that she didn't seem to care that I was moving out.

Rose had more to say, of course. She went on and on, basically about how unprepared I was for life, and actually asked me if I was really ready to be out on my own. Which made it perfectly clear to me that she didn't understand one thing about me. I was completely ready to be on my own. Finally Bobbie pointed out, "She's eighteen. She's an adult now." Which I really appreciated. And then they backed off. I was surprised that Rose gave up so easily, because it wasn't like her. Later I overheard them talking in the next room, Rose's loud voice announcing her opinions and Bobbie's soft voice answering, and then Rose practically shouted, "That's why it won't last. When she gets this out of her system, hopefully she'll get serious about her life." There's a vote of confidence for you. But it turned out she was right, of course.

In the beginning it was wonderful. We couldn't keep our hands off each other. I would wake up early in the morning while Danny was still asleep and look at him lying there, so beautiful and unguarded, his eyes closed, his mouth open. He usually had a hard-on. We would lie close together, my leg draped over his, and looking at his pale eyelids I would wonder what he was seeing in his dreams. I would try to imagine what it would be like to see the world through his eyes, and I wished that I could step into his brain. But all I could do was imagine. Then he would wake up and we would put our arms around each other, before he'd jump up and go pee—he always needed to pee as soon as he woke up—and then he'd come back and we'd get it on. I loved the taste of him. His skin, his lips, his saliva. It's funny how a person won't share a toothbrush but will put their tongue in someone else's mouth. Danny was puzzled when I said that once, because there was no way that he would ever share his toothbrush, and he didn't think that was odd at all.

We slept late, because he didn't have to go to work at Pet Station until one o'clock. We would have breakfast and horse around some, and then he'd shower and go to work. I'd clean up the house, spend some time on Facebook, read magazines, do my nails, and generally try to stay out of Martin's way while he did his sawing and hammering. But Martin was gone by late afternoon so we had the house to ourselves again by the time Danny got home. I would slowly undress him, and he would undress me, and then we'd fuck and then we'd lie there and talk and laugh. He managed to sneak the sex book out of his dad's house, and we went through it page by page together. Sometimes the instructions were downright funny, and we would stop horsing around and laugh our heads off. In fact we laughed a lot when we were fucking. I don't know if

that's normal, but it was fun. Once Danny got out Martin's tape measure and we measured his boner. We thought that was hilarious.

In the evening Danny went to work at the movie theater, or we hung out with our friends. Ryan and Matthew could be counted on to show up at our house with beer and snacks. Then they'd go outside to play basketball with Danny until it got dark and sometimes even after it got dark, because then the motion-detection light switched on. Martin had installed this for security, but it was perfect for playing at night. I would watch TV inside, listening to the *thump thump wonk* of the ball hitting the pavement and the backboard, and marvel at how much energy those boys had. Then they would come in and have a beer.

Basically sitting around and drinking beer was the main entertainment. Though I wasn't much of a drinker myself. In high school I went to all the parties where everyone danced a lot, made out a lot, and drank the beer that various older brothers got for us. Franny was able to have a beer or two and not make herself sick or do anything embarrassing, but right off the bat I found that drinking made me puke, and I don't know about you, but if there was one thing in the world I did not want to do, it was puke. I could never be bulimic, even if I were as big as Rose. I never understood how girls could do that. After that first time, I decided I just didn't need to drink so much to have a good time. I think my attitude might also have had something to do with Vivian. I mean, just the thought of Vivian wobbling across the room, looking pathetic, was a huge incentive to stay sober. So I'd have a beer now and then, but I stopped there. I didn't need to get a buzz on to have a good time.

One night Danny went off and stayed out late without me. He never called or anything, just rolled in at about 2:30am with some lame excuse. He said that he had gone over to Ryan's brother's house after work, and they'd had a few beers, and he'd lost track of the time. I didn't know what to say to that, so I kept my mouth shut. When I don't know what to say I generally just wait until I do. But it bothered me that he never even thought about me. He dropped onto the bed and immediately fell sound asleep, and I lay there looking at him, his face pale in the moonlight coming through the window. His lashes were dark against his face, and his mouth was slackly open, and it was all I could do to keep from running my hand over his cheek. The next morning he nuzzled me awake and he was his sweet self again and I just let it slide.

A couple of weeks later it happened again, and again a week after that, and then it was becoming a regular thing. The next day he'd ask me what time he got home, and I'd tell him, and he'd apologize really sweetly, and for a while we'd be back to normal. If you could call that normal. Because it bothered me more and more, and finally I stopped being the sweet sad mouse and challenged him when he rolled in late.

"You couldn't just call?" I asked him as he stood before me, unsteady on his feet, trying to disentangle his arm from his jacket. "How hard is that?"

"Who are you, my fucking mother?" he replied, freeing himself and dropping the jacket on the floor.

That's the kind of smartass answer that stopped me cold. How can a girl stand up to the mother retort? I figured the best thing was to ignore it and move on. So I did. "Do you figure I'm sitting at home, waiting up for you?"

“Don’t do me any favors,” he said sarcastically, “waiting up for me.”

“Good,” I said, “I don’t. I always find something else to do.” I figured that would remind him that I could have a life without him. Not that I did. Not much, anyway. When he didn’t show up at home I would go over to Madison’s house and hang out there with some other kids I knew from High School.

“You’re just looking for an excuse to go hook up with some asshole,” he said, glaring at me. I was completely unprepared for an answer like that. I left the room while he hollered, “Tears aren’t going to get you anywhere, you know.”

These fights started to become part of our routine. Sometimes I figured it would be better to bring it up the next day when he was sober, but then he would get irritable, telling me I was trying to control him, that I was smothering him, that I was tying him down. He had a million ways of saying that I was wrong. Things went on like this for weeks, alternating between good times and bad and then back to good again. There were mornings when we lay together in the sunny little bedroom, stroking each other and smiling and whispering, and mornings when we fought about his showing up at two in the morning after I had spent all evening trying not to think about him, and hating myself for wondering where he was.

What kind of loser came home to an empty house and sat around wishing her douchebag boyfriend would come home? Me I guess. But finally one night I resolved that this was the night that things would be different. I may have been a loser before, but now I would act like someone who wasn’t a loser. Like Franny. What would Franny do? This would be my new motto: What Would Franny Do. WWFD.

One thing you can count on about Franny is that she’ll stand up to people. She stood up to Mr. Carney, our fifth-grade teacher, when he took away her paper because she was talking during a test. When he snatched it away she was so astonished she sat there for a minute, watching him return to the front of the room. Then she walked right up to where he had turned to write some stuff on the board and she said very slowly and deliberately, “Mr. Carney, that isn’t fair. I was telling Carter to stop looking at my paper. If you want to take someone’s paper away, it should be his.”

Mr. Carney turned around and looked at her standing there, her chest stuck out and her hands behind her back. From where I sat I could see that her fingers were all twisted together. He took off his glasses and said, “Well then, Frances, maybe you should have ignored Carter.”

She stood there a moment and then said, cool as a cucumber, “Okay, that’s what you want, next time I’ll ignore him and he can copy off my paper all he wants.” And then she pirouetted around and walked very stiffly back to her seat. She sat down, her back so straight it looked unnatural, with her hands folded on the desk like an old-fashioned picture, looking straight ahead, ignoring Mr. Carney as he came down the row to her. Probably no one else could see this, but I figured she was trying not to cry, because Franny was a real test taker. She loved to show what she knew, and she studied for these things like they were important, which I always thought was interesting, because I have to say I could never really see the point. Anyway, I knew what she was doing in her head: She was making a list. That’s what she did when she wanted to focus really hard and not show she was upset. She probably still does it. She taught this to me, and I did it sometimes myself. You’d say to yourself, list the towns along San Pablo Avenue: Oakland, Emeryville, Berkeley, Albany, El Cerrito, Richmond, San Pablo, El

Sobrante, Pinole, Hercules . . . trying to keep them all in order in your head and not miss a single one. And while you were doing that no one realized that inside you were trying not to cry.

Mr. Carney came slouching down the aisle, and put the test back on the desk in front of her, saying, "Maybe next time you'll be more careful, Frances," then went back to the front of the room. We talked about that later, and I asked what on earth that was supposed to mean. Careful about what? And Franny said it didn't mean anything, it was just all he could think of saying rather than say "I was wrong and you were right, Frances."

Maybe Franny worried too much about right and wrong, and about what she was going to do in life. But no one but me knew this: when she was doing a lot of worrying she chewed the inside of her cheek until it was a raw sore inside. She made me promise not to tell, so I didn't, but I always wished she could find another way to be worried. Still, for all the worrying she did inside, on the outside Franny was all about standing up for herself. So when I asked WWFD, I knew the answer. Franny wouldn't sit around waiting for her loser boyfriend to show up. She'd go out and look for that dipwad. So I did.

I walked down to the Last Stop to see if I could borrow my mom's car. Outside on the sidewalk it was cool, dark and quiet, so when I opened the door and stepped inside, I was stunned for a moment by the deafening noise and damp warm air. There was music playing but all I could make out was an insistent base line. Dieter was sitting near the door hanging with Rose, while Bobbie worked the other end of the bar. I couldn't see Vivian anywhere, and Rose said she was off somewhere, probably at her boyfriend's in San Francisco. So her car would be with her. Just my luck.

"Take the truck, Honey," Dieter shouted over the din, fishing the keys from his pocket. "I can get a ride from one of these folks." He gestured the length of the bar in the mirror, filled with faces, mouths open, animated with sound and gesture. As he handed me the keys he added, "Take it slow until you're used to the clutch." Dieter had taught both Franny and me how to drive stick shift, but I still stalled it on a regular basis.

So there I was at 11:00pm, out on the dark streets in Dieter's truck, chewing on a hangnail and struggling with the stick shift, trying to think what Franny would do if she were searching for Danny. I seriously doubted Franny would have put up with him this long to begin with, but never mind, I'd still use her as an inspiration. WWFD.

Franny would be methodical. So would I. First I drove slowly by each of his friend's houses, looking for his beat up old car out front. Nothing. What next? Food. I drove by MacDonald's, Nation's Hamburgers, and Al's Burgers. No sign of Danny's car. I drove by the movie theater. Nothing. And finally, at 12:30, I couldn't think of anywhere else to look, so I just drove up and down random streets looking at cars parked in the dark shadows under the trees. What would Franny do now? I couldn't think of anything else she would do, so I drove home. I could return Dieter's truck the next day.

What would Franny do next? Probably get a good night's sleep and yell at Danny in the morning. Point out that staying out all night was disrespectful, and didn't even make sense coming from the guy who told everyone he wanted us to get married.

I walked around the house in the dark, from room to room, looking out of each window. From the front room there was enough light from the streetlight to see the driveway, but the back yard was inky black. My finger was bleeding where I had been

chewing on it, but my teeth wouldn't leave that hangnail alone. I went back into the kitchen, turned on the light, and opened the refrigerator. I wasn't really hungry, I just needed something to do. Apples, milk, peanut butter, mayonnaise, mustard, catsup, a package of hotdogs, some little cartons of vanilla yogurt, half of a loaf of bread, and some beer. I took out a piece of bread and a can of beer, opened the can and sat down at the table. I tore the bread into bite-sized pieces and ate them one by one as I drank the beer. The bread was stale.

My laptop was on the table. I pulled it over to me and opened it up to see if there was anything going on. There wasn't much. From where I was sitting I had a good view of the phone and all the phone numbers scribbled next to it. Who writes on the wall? What kind of loser keeps their contact list in pencil on a kitchen wall? I turned out the light and sat in the dark.

The motion detector light suddenly flashed on outside. I was so sure it was Danny that I scurried to the bedroom and sprang into bed to fake sleep. I wasn't going to let him find me wide-awake at three-thirty in the morning, pacing around the house in the dark, freaking out over him. I hadn't heard his car pull into the driveway, but I figured maybe he got a ride, which would be a good idea because by now he had to be seriously hammered. I lay without moving, listening for him, but all I could hear was my noisy breathing into the sheet pulled halfway over my face. Breathing in. Breathing out. (Was there something wrong with me to make it so noisy there under the sheet?) I held my breath to listen for Danny. Nothing. It was like the night had sucked the life out of the house. Finally I threw off the sheet and sat up. Silence. I got up and shuffled into the front room where I peered out the window. The motion light was still on and a skunk was waddling down the driveway. It figures.

I finally went back to bed at six-thirty, and that's when I heard his car. He rolled in, said, "Hey," like it was nothing, and fell into bed. He slept until two-thirty. When he woke up, I lay down on the bed beside him, and suddenly he said, "Remember how you kept asking what happened between me and Brianna, and I never told you?"

Clearly this conversation was not going to end well. The only person who can possibly benefit from a conversation that begins with an ex would be the speaker. And possibly the ex. Actually, *probably* the ex. "Uh-huh," I murmured, not making eye contact. He hitched himself up on his elbow, facing me. I focused on his arm, with its blue-green veins showing on the underside of his wrist, like rivers on a map.

"It was because she was trying to own me." There was a long silence. I was beginning to feel sick in the pit of my stomach, but I wasn't going to say anything until I knew where this was going. Finally he said, "She acted like we were married or something. It was just too much." That sick feeling was getting stronger. But still I didn't say anything. I wasn't going to help him out. He was going to have to do this on his own.

"Now it's happening with us." There it was. He said it. And he was waiting for a response. But I couldn't think of a thing to say. After all, it wasn't me who kept saying we were going to get married. But it seemed pointless to bring that up now. I didn't know what to bring up. I was full of feelings that didn't have sentences attached to them. I could see our mornings lying in the sun, waking up to each other. I could feel how his skin felt against mine, and how it tasted to kiss. And I could remember cracking up over the tape measure. I could picture us out dancing at a party, drenched with sweat and both

of us singing along with the music. And all of these pictures had my love in them, but none of them had a paragraph that I could recite like a magic charm to win Danny back. Not while he was freaking out about being hemmed in.

Of course, taking off without me all those nights made more sense now. That's what he was doing. Freaking out. And now, looking back, I can see that he didn't have a magic charm either, a paragraph to recite to me to say he wasn't ready for what we had become. That we shouldn't have moved so fast. That I shouldn't have moved in. Here he was trying to say something now, and I didn't have a single thing to say in answer.

Since then I've come to understand that when I moved in with him all I was thinking about was getting the hell out of my mom's crowded apartment and away from the family freak show. And not just because my mom was being a pain in the ass. Because they all were, with their laser focus on me, constantly on my case. Franny was out on her own, even if it was just in college, which I wouldn't have done if you'd paid me, but still, she was away, and I wanted some of that freedom. So I had been confident that living with Danny would be the best move ever. I just hadn't thought it through.

"It's just too much for me, Honey," Danny went on earnestly. "And in a year I'm going to college. And, well, I don't know. I don't know how to say this. I just think it would be weird for us to be living together when that time comes."

I knew he was trying to do the right thing, but I couldn't think of any words that were not sad and pathetic. And the one thing I was clear about was that I did not want to appear sad and pathetic. WWFD? Franny wouldn't sit around looking sad and pathetic either. Franny would stand up tall and walk out of there. She'd be all *Ciao baby, you'll live to regret this*. So I sat up, got dressed, and started to pack. Danny sat there watching me, a stricken look on his face. By the time I had all my things stacked by the front door he was up and dressed and following me around saying, "Don't go. Not yet. Stay here. Let's talk." But I knew that he had been telling me for weeks now that this was a mistake, telling me with his absence. There was no point in further conversation, so I just kept shaking my head, no, no, no. Finally he put his arms around me, and we kissed, and I almost let it change my mind because I still felt everything the same way, even when my mind knew it was over. It was a sizzling last kiss, and when it was over we just looked at each other, our eyes locked, tenderness radiating out of us and filling the whole room, but I broke that spell. "I'm leaving now." I was really glad I had Dieter's truck so I could just walk right out of there and drive home. It would have been lame to have to ask for a ride.

Danny helped me put my stuff in the truck, and we said goodbye there on the sidewalk, and then I turned abruptly, got in the truck and managed to drive it away without stalling, leaving him to watch me go.

Of course, everyone at home wanted to know what was going on. Vivian acted really sweet and sympathetic, and I could tell she was dying to know what happened, but whenever she asked I just said, "No, we didn't have a big fight. It's no big deal. We just split up." Rose, though, was not going to let this get by her.

"What happened, sweetheart?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"Don't tell me nothing. Did something bad happen between you? Did Danny do something hurtful?" and that just irritated me. Of course he didn't. Danny wasn't like that.

Franny was the only one I confided in, until she said, “Don’t split up with him, Honey. Just scale it back.” I didn’t think I could tell her that she had been my inspiration to walk out. Later I heard that Brianna was back in the picture, though Danny did call me from time to time. He thought we should go out again, but I said no way. I may have been stupid once, but I wasn’t going to be stupid twice.

Chapter 2

WHAT TIME IS IT? I can't see the clock. Someone has moved it to make room for a vase of sticks, and I have to wonder why someone would put sticks in a vase. They weren't there before. What time was it then? Who knows?

There is nothing to anchor me to time. Nothing, there is nothing. I don't know if it's day or night. The noises are the same either way. From somewhere behind me a monotonous CLICK, PING repeats over and over. And continuous voices that I can't make out, a wordless murmur like musical notes forming flat queries and urgent responses. Day or night there is always the TV on in the next room and mysterious announcements over a PA system. And always, always there is the eerie shush of the massager, breathing like an animal, curled around my legs. I open my eyes and Rose is here. I close them just for a moment, open them again, and she's gone. Dieter shows up with the newspaper, but it's too difficult to read. I can't concentrate on all that gray and black. I tell him to bring some magazines, for crying out loud. Meanwhile I still have no idea what time it is.

Chapter 3

I HAVE TO SAY coming back to the family wasn't much of an improvement.

Mom was going through one of her times of financial difficulty, as she put it. Translated, that means she had been laid off and was way behind in her rent, so Rose and Bobbie had invited her to move into Franny's old room. It was strange to walk in and see Franny's room full of Vivian's things. And now my things as well. Franny's bed was a double, so I had a place to sleep, but it meant sharing the bed with my mom. Rose said that when Franny came home she could sleep on the living room sofa.

It was close quarters. We're talking here about a sorry little apartment crammed with four adults and a small dog at the top of a narrow staircase running up from the back of the bar. Perfect for Vivian because bars have always played a big part in her life. She started coming by the Last Stop a gazillion years ago when she had a boyfriend who was a semi-regular there. So at first she came in with him, and she just got to hanging out there more and more, even after the boyfriend became history, until pretty soon she was one of the regulars, trolling for attention and dates, and she and Bobbie and Rose became thick as thieves, as Rose liked to say. Then I came along, and Vivian was having some problems adjusting to motherhood, and in all the confusion apparently she mislaid the boyfriend who had gotten her pregnant.

By this time it should be clear to you that Vivian has had some issues relating to alcohol. That's an understatement. She's always been a total lush, and as a result from time to time her life would spin completely out of control. When I was a baby this had been one of those times. Being an infant, I wasn't in on the details, but I've since heard all about it. We lived in Rose's motel for years, moving from room to room, depending on which was vacant, or more to the point, depending on which needed something fixed, because Rose couldn't rent a room to a paying guest if it had something broken in it. There were times when Rose even gave Vivian a job cleaning the motel rooms, when Vivian had what she called an employment emergency, which happened now and then because, as Rose liked to point out, Vivian's life tended to be disorganized. This never lasted too long, because Vivian was a terrible cleaner. She was slow, she left the cleaning supplies behind here and there in the room, and she was sloppy about dusting and vacuuming. Rose had to continually nag her, and Vivian would whine and complain, until finally she'd find a new job so she could quit the cleaning charade.

But other than the cleaning, living in the motel worked out pretty well, because my mom could go to work, and Rose would take care of me. She was already taking care of Franny, so the two of us were raised together. Things didn't change much when mom and I finally moved out of the motel and into a little house just down the street. We went back and forth so much between Rose's apartment and our house that they didn't feel like separate places. Each night Bobbie and Big Jeff worked the bar while Franny and I were upstairs in the apartment with Rose. My mom was around, but for her *around* could mean anything from hanging in the bar to partying with one of her boyfriends, so it was Rose who made sure we ate a proper dinner, did our homework, and took a bath.

The bar was nothing to write home about, but it always had a cozy feel to it. As long as you didn't turn on the bright lights, because then it looked downright dingy. But those are only turned on for cleaning. The one nice thing about the place was the old wooden bar itself, running almost the length of the room. Dark and glossy, Rose said it was real mahogany. Behind it the wall was made up of dark wooden shelves lined with bottles, surrounding a large mirror. On the opposite wall there was a crowd of small red laminate tables, and at the front of the room, near the door, two maroon sofas faced each other over a low coffee table. Out the back door there was a tiny patio covered with a fiberglass roof, and a prehistoric orange vinyl sofa. That was for the smokers.

Like every bar the Last Stop had its regulars. The FOB's for instance, the Friends of Bobbie, who came by when Bobbie was working the bar to schmooze and get the FOB benefit of a long pour. Vivian's boyfriends tended to be regulars too. So was Dieter, and a bunch of folks who came by after work. But a couple of regulars were real standouts. One was Coyote Girl. Sometime way back the regulars started calling her that, and she thought it was cool, like some sort of Indian name or something. Franny and I didn't really know her personally, but we heard all about her. She looked okay from a distance, but up close was another story. Her long dirty blond hair was stringy, and her face, with its yellowish skin etched with lines, looked pretty beat up. Rose called her a sleepwalker, going through life without goals, without plans, without thinking about what she wanted to make of herself. Instead she pretty much hung out with losers every night and got up the next day to do it all over again. Anyway, that's what Rose told us. What she didn't mention, but we knew because we were good at eavesdropping, was that Coyote Girl was giving guys blow jobs in the bathroom and would go home with any guy who was too hammered to care about how skanky she was. She never suspected that behind her back everyone knew that she got the name Coyote Girl out of sheer disrespect. Rose says coyotes are animals that trot along after other predators, eating their leftovers. But no one ever repeated that to Coyote Girl's face.

The other standout was the Troll. She was called that to her face by everyone in the bar, but she didn't take offense because she gave herself the name. Go figure. She was short and heavysset. She worked dispatch for a trucking company so she sat all day at work, and she sat all evening in the Last Stop, and with all that sitting over the years her butt just got bigger and bigger. It's a wonder that little barstool could hold her up. She always wore the same thing, a fleece vest, jeans and cowboy boots, and a Raiders cap on her head. She had a huge chain connected to her wallet and carried a big bunch of keys on her belt. Her eyebrows and ears were pierced, and her arms were covered with tattoos of snakes and lizards. I was terrified of her when I was very little, but I soon learned that for all the alarming wildlife on her arms, she wasn't the least bit fierce. Her face, round as the moon and pink with broken capillaries, was kindly. Rose had a soft spot for the Troll, maybe because she was so big herself.

All these regulars were immortalized in snapshots taken by Rose over the years, and framed and hung on the walls of the Last Stop. Most of these photos fell into one general category: People Sitting at the Bar. There were people sitting and smiling, sitting and glaring, sitting and holding hands, sitting with arms flung over shoulders, sitting with glasses raised, and far too many with folks who didn't know how lame it is to hold up "horn" fingers behind someone else's head. Then there was a subcategory of

photos with people sitting on the sofas, some with everyone lined up neatly, some with people piled on in a drunken melee, and one with everyone on their knees with their butts facing the camera. Ha ha. There were sports pictures, mostly of the girls' soccer team sponsored by the bar, and one of a softball game that no one can remember. There were several pictures with a Christmas theme—one with Dieter wearing a Santa hat and two involving anonymous Santas sitting at the bar. There was one picture with a bride in her wedding dress, surrounded by smiling girlfriends and several smiling men holding up their drinks in a toast. And because every bar needs a celebrity picture, there was a snapshot of Rose with Linda Ronstadt, who came in one evening to see if she could get change for a twenty. Rose was thrilled because she loved her, and she offered her a free drink, but Ronstadt said she didn't drink, and just had a glass of water instead. I've heard the story a thousand times. Bobbie had to explain to us who Linda Ronstadt was.

Next door to the bar was Rose's motel. Nowadays the Welcome Back Motel is considered fun and quirky, and it was written up in a *Sunset Magazine* article about offbeat California hotels, but when I was growing up, it was just a dump. It was when I was about three and my mom and I were living there that Rose decided it was time to upgrade the place. Bobbie had some ideas, and Dieter, who was hanging around the bar those days, decided this would be a good investment. It was Bobbie's brilliant concept that each room would be decorated differently. She and Rose and Dieter went to thrift shops and salvage yards for interesting pieces of furniture and painted them bright colors. There was a Red Room, a Zebra Room (yes, black-and-white stripes everywhere—imagine trying to sleep in that), and a Victorian Room, which my mom always sarcastically called the Frou Frou Room.

My favorite room was the Flamingo Room. It got its start one day when Rose and Bobbie came home with a rattan sofa in the back of Dieter's truck. It was tropical and exotic looking, with green leaves and huge pink hibiscus flowers on the cushions. Dieter and Bobbie wrestled it off the truck, and as soon as it was in place, Franny and I hopped onto it and watched Bobbie measure the window and floor dimensions, making notes on a pad of paper. Sometime after that Bobbie began her mural. On one wall she painted a huge palm tree that went from floor to ceiling, with a big glowing moon and a pink flamingo standing on one leg in front of the moon. She painted the other walls the same soft pink as the flamingo, and painted the bed and tables apple green with gold trim, and when the sun came in the window in the late afternoon, the whole room glowed golden and pink. When we lived in that room the last thing I saw every night was that flamingo in the moonlight, and my mom and I would make a wish on the moon. Ever since, when something reminds me of that moon glow, the memory makes me smile.

End of Excerpt

I hope you enjoyed this excerpt from *Flamingo Moon*!
It is available as both Kindle and paperback editions at Amazon.

Carolyn Holm