

she had seventy-two dollars in her pocket. The morning of her departure, Sophia had told Irene, her oldest girl, to insist that her father give her grocery money every Friday, and that he take her to shop at Hardisons.

“What makes you think he’ll listen to me, when we’ve been eating beans and potatoes for near two weeks straight?” Irene asked.

“Because you’re asking. You’re his first daughter, and you’re special to him. I’ve seen it in his eyes many times. It’s me he can’t love. He won’t let his children go both hungry and motherless.”

Sophia knew it was the truth. She let that notion rest at the front of her mind as she sat outside the bus station. After a while, she sank deeply into the chair, and her breath fell into a deep and steady rhythm for the first time in three days. Minutes, then hours passed, but Sophia made no move in any direction.

When the evening bus rolled in, the force of its arrival startled Sophia, and she stood up stiffly. She squinted toward the west and surveyed the row of hotels that stretched as far as she could see. For a moment, all she could think to do was get back on the bus. Maybe ride on a little farther, postpone the onset of this new life. Decisions had to be made.

I’ve made the first one, she said to herself. I can make another one. Sophia remained still. She stood straight and statuesque in a moss-green wool skirt and a white blouse, covered with a lightweight lumber jacket zipped half way. Vacationers and locals breezed past her. What color do you like? Sophia whispered to herself. What’s your favorite color? She prodded. Blue, she finally answered. Okay. Blue. Sophia picked up her bag and walked slowly in the direction of the pastel blue motel.

Hunter’s Finale

Hunter Sawyer sat at the table with a nearly scalding cup of coffee. He liked it black because he liked it hot—and he found that if he added even a smidgeon of sugar or a drip of milk, it took away the heat. And Hunter needed as much heat as he could get. These days, he seemed always to be cold. Now he sat at his sister Edna’s kitchen table with a mug of coffee so hot that his hands were uncomfortable. He felt at peace for the first time in weeks.

Edna was Hunter’s favorite sister. Although she was seven years younger than he was, once she got up to some size, she’d somehow taken the upper hand. He remembered clearly the day heads swiveled in her direction, and redefined her place in the family. Edna was ten years old at the time, and a bachelor uncle had announced his intended visit from Philadelphia. He’d actually called from the bus station, and would be arriving the next morning. Hunt and Edna’s mother, Claudia Sawyer, went into a tailspin, figuring out who would double up with whom in order to create a separate room for her brother. This one would sleep head-to-foot with that one, and so forth. But in the midst of the conjecturing, Edna had said, “If he’s brave enough to say he’s coming without an invitation, he’s brave enough to stay in the hotel. Don’t you think, Mama? Call the hotel and put a room in his name. Daddy can pick him up from the station, let him check into his room, and then bring him here for dinner. We don’t need to watch him sleep, do we? He isn’t poor, is he?”

From that day on, Edna was known to have more common sense than the rest—parents included; and later in life, she was the one Hunt trusted the most. There

were five Sawyer siblings. Hunt was right in the middle—the one Edna said would have been overlooked altogether if not for her. Now the oldest of the Sawyers was dead, and the youngest of them was the matriarch. Go figure.

At any rate, Hunt's heavy heart was made a bit lighter by the coffee and stove-top bread Edna sat on the table between them. They topped it with her homemade peach preserves. His heart needed the warmth of this afternoon because he'd been sleepless and aimless for the better part of three weeks. His doctor had confirmed cancer. He couldn't quite call him his doctor because it was only the second time he'd seen the man. The first visit had warranted blood tests and a chest X-ray. The follow-up delivered the diagnosis.

When he left the doctor's office, Hunter was stunned in the way of somebody informed that his car needed a transmission at a time when he had no money in his pocket or in the bank. He'd walked out strong, straight and dry-eyed, but bewildered. Hunt's strongest bone of contention was the certainty of spitting up blood if he smoked a cigarette. And when he walked out with his fate so darkly sealed, Hunt wanted a cigarette more than anything in the world. But Dr. Philbin said it was lung cancer. And that was the reason for the blood. Before contacting Dr. Philbin, he'd tried a half-dozen cough syrups, drinking vinegar and honey, and rubbing Vicks on his chest. He figured there was some inflamed condition he could deal with. But it was his woman, Lily, who finally said, "Hunt, you need to take this to the doctor."

"I haven't seen a doctor in twenty years."

"Maybe that's why you're in the shape you're in. Call my doctor. Dr. Philbin. Want me to make you an appointment?"

"I can't miss work."

"I'll see if he can take you in the evening."

It took nine weeks before his appointment rolled around. It pissed Hunt off that he could have already been dead by the time they worked him in.

Hunt had wondered if he should tell Edna. He needed his sister, but he needed her strong and cocky the way she was. He didn't need her broken the way she'd been when their mother died, or when her first husband was killed in the log woods. He knew how death could destroy a spirit for more than a season. Something told Hunt that Edna would fare better with losing her brother if she had a job to do, an obligation to fill. And life sure could work things out, because he had a great big job for her.

Hunt broke the silence. "If anything happens to me, would you take Kurt and Carlene till they finish school? And the baby too. Christ. It's a lot."

"Where are you going? Is there a woman trying to kill you again?" she asked. Edna only half-smiled, because women were the only wedge that the siblings sometimes had between them. Edna had wondered a few times whether there was some corner in her brother's heart that was dark and molded when it came to women. There was no rhyme or reason to his choices, or to how he treated them. And things could go ridiculously off track. Just like Sophie leaving him off-the-cuff with all the children to raise. Edna had never received a straight enough answer from Hunt to know the truth. But she replied, "If anything happened to you, I'd take them. Of course I'd take them."

Hunt went to the sink and poured out the cooling coffee. He refilled his cup with the strong brew in the tin pot on the burner. They were quiet for a moment. "I appreciate