UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM

SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

Name: Kristine K. Fox

College: Arts and Sciences Department: English

Faculty Mentor: Michael Knight

PROJECT TITLE: A Faded Heaven a novel

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: _____, Faculty Mentor

Date: 5/8/02

Comments (Optional):

Senior Honors Project

The University of Tennessee

A Faded Heaven

By

K.K. Fox

Mentored by:

Michael Knight

May 7, 2002

Chapter 1

Standing on a ranch that stretched for acres in hard, straight lines, Kat had trouble breathing in the open space that surrounded her. A Texas sun stared intently overhead, and a cow lay dead at her feet. Kat's throat swelled with the mixed urge to scream and laugh. Nothing ever came out, it just got stuck and hurt. She glanced up at Faith and Toni who hovered as intently as flies that buzzed over the fresh cow carcass. The three girls had just spent two days crammed in an overstuffed Volvo pouring over western road maps and planning where'd they go and what they'd do. Kat thought the car was confining with its stream of stale air sliding out of the vent, which did nothing to cover the smell of sun-heated upholstery and dust. But now, she felt cramped by the dead cow that lay on a endless acres of airy land. The ranch was the first destination on their western road trip, and Toni's grandfather had promised to show them a cow roping. No one knew that the cow was sick. Toni's cousin, Hart, chose that cow, because she lingered as an easy target apart from the herd. When Granddaddy and the girls approached, the cow lay panting feverishly on her side. Panic-stricken and in pain, the cow finally sucked in one grave breath and surrendered it to the atmosphere. Then she lay still, which left Kat unprepared to fight the reappearing image of her father before he died. The thinning hair and sallow cheeks flooded her thoughts, though the memory suddenly included a disgusting, exaggerated huff, which stretched apart his thin, dry lips. She gagged and walked away with a hand grasping her stomach. Granddaddy and Hart studied the cow and shook their heads.

"Damn it." Hart grunted, hitting the side of his thigh and clenching his teeth.

"Forget it, Hart. It doesn't matter now." Granddaddy squinted his eyes and surveyed the ranchland in the distance, staring over the dead animal. "If she was sick, she was goin' to die anyways. Costs me money either way."

Granddaddy's ranch extended to the horizon in a rigidly elongated line. The low canyons that broke up the land hid from Kat's view. She considered sprinting across the green land speckled with red patches of Indian blanket. There was no breeze to separate her from the still air that settled over the lifeless cow, and she shivered in the summer heat.

"Well, let's go, Girls." Granddaddy slipped a hunk of sloppy tobacco behind his lip and headed back toward the Bronco.

"What about the cow?" Toni asked.

"There's nothin' left to do here." Granddaddy waved for them to follow, but the girls didn't move. Kat couldn't tell if it was fear or awe that left Faith and Toni frozen in their stances, but she was simply paralyzed. Her legs felt like gelatin.

"Nothing left," She whispered to herself.

"You're going to leave it here?" Faith asked, fascinated.

"There's got to be something you can do," Toni insisted. She looked at the Bronco, then at the cow, and then at the Bronco. Granddaddy shook his head.

"Don't even think about it," He said as if he had read her mind. "It's cheaper this way."

"It'll turn into one of those cow skulls that you see in old westerns," Faith said, intrigued.

"Because the flies will devour it," Kat mumbled, watching the flies multiply over the cow's body like a cancer. She was suddenly unsure of her decision to go on this trip. Her father died a year and a half ago, and her mother hadn't tried to stop her. Something inside of Kat was clawing to get out, and she assumed it was the urge to travel, to go somewhere else, and to feel free. The Mississippi River marked the farthest western point that she or her mother had traveled, and when the Volvo crossed over it, Kat felt a pang of guilt.

"Whatcha thinkin'?" A pair of fingers snapped in front of Kat's face. Caught off guard, her breath wedged in her chest. Hart grinned at her alarmed expression as she tried to locate her voice.

"Nothing." She forced a smile.

"Nothin', huh?" Hart's eyebrows lifted in question, wrinkling the browned skin of his forehead. "I never thought someone could find nothin' so interesting." He picked up the lasso he used on the cow and slung it over his horse. Kat stood there uncertain of what to say until Toni called from behind her.

"Kat, where leaving!"

Kat hurried over to the Bronco and climbed in behind Faith and Toni. Her seatbelt was buckled before the others got situated. Kat glanced out the window wishing she could ride back on Hart's horse instead of in the Bronco. During the entire ride up to the pastureland, Kat had gripped the handle of the door with her right hand and her pinkish, white thigh with the other. She had gripped so hard, that she left the beginnings of a bruise on her leg. To get to the pasture, Granddaddy four-wheeled the Bronco down into a canyon and up the other side. The tires slipped and spun on loose rocks and steep edges,

and Kat wasn't sure if her heart could handle the ride back the other way. Of course, Faith and Toni didn't even notice or care. It was hard enough to get them to wear their seatbelts while on the road. But Kat had always been this way, even before her father died.

"It was like the soul just floated right out of the body," Faith said.

"Yea, it fluttered away with little dollar bills for wings." Granddaddy mumbled, and the girls muffled their snickers. "Let's stop for some beer."

Granddaddy lived in a dry county, so to get beer he had to drive to the county line where there was always a beer store. The girls were astonished that it sold nothing but beer. No liquor, no gas, no cigarettes, no tobacco. Just beer. He carried out two thirty packs. One was the girls' Coors Light, and one was Bud heavy for himself. He cracked open a can during the drive home, and Kat dreaded that they might get pulled over by a cop.

"We'll go horseback riding after lunch." Toni announced when they arrived at the house. It was a small, brick square that sat alone against the Texas horizon. The neighbor's house was a mile and a half away. From the road, the house looked like a cluster of trees, the only trees in sight. Toni explained it was because the water supply of the house allowed trees to spring up around it. They followed Toni over to the stable to watch the horses roam and graze inside the fence.

"Is Hart going horseback riding?" Faith smiled.

"Don't you have a boyfriend?" Toni asked with a careful blend of sarcasm and teasing. Kat was never certain whether Faith was being serious or not. Though she dated Hunter for two years, she still waved at truckers and gushed over famous faces. While

driving past Memphis, she dramatically flung herself to the window pawing at the small glimpse of the city.

"I thought we'd see Graceland," She cried.

"You can't see it from the interstate." Kat shrugged.

"Why didn't anyone tell me this?" Faith groaned.

"You know Elvis is dead, right?" Toni joked.

"I'd still sleep in his bed." Faith said matter-of-factly. She was always saying and doing things like that. Kat wondered if Hunter had ever heard her talk like that. She felt uncomfortable around Faith when she was with Hunter, because she didn't act like herself. She was coy and giggly, laughing at some of Hunter's jokes that Kat found crude. When Faith was with Hunter, she acted like nothing more than a mere detail in the room. Yet nothing about Faith was a detail. She had wide, green eyes that each had a red speck in them. Almost like a beauty mark for each eye. Her words were saturated in a homegrown, South Carolina accent, but her speech was delivered with such careful annunciation it was impossible not to listen to her. Faith's hair wasn't red. The word red was too ordinary for her hair. While riding in the Volvo, Kat caught a glimpse of Faith who stared out the window at a whir of green. A rebellious strand of hair continued to slip against Faith's cheek. As a reflex, she batted it away again and again. She never noticed the fiery red glow that the strand emitted as the sun fell through it.

"That's it, you've had it," Faith said to Toni wearing a witty smirk. She charged Toni, and they play fought, running around in circles and swinging one another around. Toni was not the best person to fight against. With three older brothers, she was a difficult match. Her broad-shoulders and firm stance made her impossible to knock down.

By the time Faith gave in, she was breathless with laughter. Kat stood by amused. She usually didn't get involved, unless Faith or Toni dragged her into it. The trip had been that way for Kat. It was Faith's idea, and Toni made all the plans. Kat was just along for the ride. She didn't care where they went, as long as she saw the Pacific Ocean. She wanted to be on the other side of the country away from everything. The farther away she was, the less she would have to think about anything familiar. The interstate through Arkansas had been nothing but a border of trees, but in Texas, the landscape shot off in hard, straight lines that bolted beyond the horizon. The point where the land and the sky met wasn't the smooth mating of the Virginian horizon. In Texas, there didn't appear to be a place for the sun to rest. Instead, Kat figured that the sun would have to force itself into the thin line of the horizon like a coin into a slot. Cattle and corrals speckled the land, and when the sunset passed behind them, Kat could only see their blackened silhouettes. When the sky faded into a dark pink, the clouds became stretching trails of cotton candy.

"Pull over." Kat blurted, almost surprising herself.

"You should have gone to the bathroom when you had the chance." Toni joked.

"No, I want to take a picture of the sunset." Kat grabbed her camera from her bag, and leaned her head between the two front seats. "Please pull over."

"Alright." Toni began to slow the Volvo down as they came over a stretched hill, and when they reached the bottom, she pulled onto the side of the road. Kat jumped out and ran to a wooden fence lining the road, but being on lower land, a rickety barn easily blocked the setting sun.

"Get back in the car!" She yelled, charging back just as Faith and Toni were climbing out.

"Why?" Faith was irritated.

"We have to catch it," Kat pleaded. They clamored back into the car and hurried up the road until the sun smiled above the landscape. Its belly had touched the line of the horizon, and it would drop quickly. Toni slammed on the brakes, which flung the bags in the backseat forward, and Kat hurried out of the car. She leapt onto the wooden fence and captured one photo of the sun before it slipped out of sight. She stood in silence, staring, and she could feel Toni and Faith staring behind her.

"I hope that was worth it." Toni said. Kat watched the colors of the sky smolder and darken. She let her arms rest against her.

"This alone is worth it." She thought to herself and drew in a deep breath. It sent a tingle up her spine, and her head felt light. She was determined to follow that setting sun into the west. The sky quickly dimmed into a deep purple radiance that shadowed everything in the distance, and the light that glowed from beyond the horizon lay like a strange calm over the land.

As Kat remembered their sunset chase, she realized that she hadn't taken any pictures all day. She hauled out the camera from her bag and snapped a picture of Faith and Toni as they leaned over the fence stroking a dark brown horse. The horse came forward so they could stroke its nose and mane. Faith glanced back at Kat with the camera, and she beamed.

"Pictures!" She cried and flung her head back in a pose, her arm shooting out to the sky. The horse reared back frightened, and its nose hit the back of Faith's shoulders. She toppled to the ground.

"Hey now!" Hart yelled, riding up the long drive on his return from roping the cow. "Watch it!" Toni scrambled away from the fence so that the horse could calm down. Hart let his horse loose into the fenced corral then hastened to Faith who was brushing the dirt from her jeans wearing a disgusted frown. Kat and Toni pulled her up.

"Are you alright?" Hart asked.

"I'm sorry that happened," Kat apologized. "Who knew the horse would get upset?"

"It's not your fault." Faith shook her head. She glanced at her clothes that had a streak of brown, dusty dirt down her right side. "The pose scared him."

"Oh, I thought Toni's face scared him." Hart grinned, and he received a solid punch in the arm.

"Horses don't normally scare that easy." Toni frowned.

"That's a younger one," Hart explained. "Though, you have to watch horses. Especially if you don't have much experience." Kat stared at him with worry. She didn't have any experience.

"Why?" She hadn't wanted to ask, but nobody explained.

"Horses can sense your fear." Toni nodded at the horses trotting in the field.

"Yea, so when you get on one, you gotta take control." Hart clenched his fists like he was holding onto reigns. Kat just squeezed tighter on the strap of her camera.

"Did you know that, Faith?" She hoped she wasn't the only clueless one. But she was.

"Sure. I used to ride horses all the time in Spartanburg." Faith glanced in Hart's direction as she talked. "I even did some equestrian riding for a little while."

"I didn't know that," Toni said quickly.

"I was young, but I still remember. I can't wait to get back on a horse and try out my old stuff." Faith combed a hand through her hair, and Kat immediately recognized her behavior change. It was if Hunter were standing there with them. Hart crossed his arms over his chest.

"It'll be fun. We'll go for a ride this afternoon." He grinned. As Toni, Faith, and Hart continued to talk, Kat fiddled with her camera, unscrewing pieces in order to pack it up in its bag. She kept her head bent away from the conversation.

Chapter 2

Faith ran her fingers through her hair, under her chin, behind her ear, down her neck, and back again. It was an unconscious sequence that occurred naturally whenever a new person was near. By instinct, her body performed this operation like a peacock spreading its feather to a potential mate. It didn't matter who it was, Faith just had to appear attractive. She was stunned when the horse knocked her off the fence, but the moment that she spotted Hart's boots shuffling over to where she was, she forgot completely about the faint pain in her hip. Instead, she ran her fingers through her hair, under her chin, behind her ear, down her neck, and back again. Then a dimple deepened under Hart's left eye as he smiled.

"Did you know that, Faith?" Kat's voice jerked Faith out of her thoughts. For a moment, she couldn't remember what they were talking about.

"Of course. I used to ride in Spartanburg." Faith glanced at Hart. The dimple was still there.

"You did?" Toni asked surprised. She knew almost everything about Faith. Almost everything but that little part that no one ever really reveals.

"I was young, but I still remember. I can't wait to get back on a horse." Subtly, she sighed with relief. She wasn't lying. It all was true, but she knew she made herself sound like a fantastic horse rider, which she wasn't. Faith wasn't sure where her words came from sometimes. They just spilled from her mouth leaving her to worry about details later. Instead of continuing to talk, she smoothed her hand through her hair.

"It'll be fun. We'll go for a ride this afternoon." Hart replied. There was the dimple again.

"Sure." Faith smiled wide.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Toni asked, then Faith remembered the dirt caked on her clothes. She frowned and dashed at it with her hand.

"I might take a shower." Faith thought aloud.

"Before you go riding?" Toni almost laughed.

"Yea," Faith said. She couldn't understand the amusement in Toni's voice. "I think I'll take a shower." As she said this, Hart leaned over Kat, who was messing with her big, bulky camera. He said something to her, but Faith wasn't sure what, because Toni decided to talk at the same time.

"Well, whatever." Toni strolled past everyone inside the house. Kat smiled at Hart, so Faith leaned down to join the obviously amusing conversation, but Kat was just getting up. They accidentally bumped heads.

"Ladies, I believe you're gonna need some help gettin' outta here alive." Hart laughed and helped both of them up with an arm in each hand. His hand was strong, and he probably had a firm handshake.

"What do you say we get something to eat?" Hart motioned to the house. Kat quickly headed inside, and Faith lingered back a bit so that she and Hart were alone.

"Do you have a cigarette?" Faith looked for the dimple, but it wasn't there.

"I don't smoke." Hart shrugged and headed to the house.

"Me neither." Faith laughed. "However, I do get that silly craving every once in a while. Thought you might know what I mean."

"Nope." He shook his head. "Quit a year ago."

"Good for you." Faith chimed, and quickened her pace a little. She didn't want to appear as if she was trying to walk with him.

During the entire ride from Longwood College in Virginia to the Flying T-5 ranch in Texas, Faith craved a cigarette. She wanted to roll it around in her hands, poke it with her finger, and lick it with her tongue. Then, she could smoke it, down to her fingertips. There was a pack sitting unopened in her makeup case, hidden deep beneath the nail polishes. No one would find it there. Not her parents, or Toni, or Kat, or Hunter. He didn't want her to go on this trip and that made her want to go more. Something about driving out west lingered in her mind like a temptation she couldn't refuse, like the staircase of the dorm at school. She always disregarded the 'No Smoking' sign where she sat to light her cigarette, and she wondered what happened to the good old days when everyone really did smoke, though they pretended like they didn't. She never really needed anyone to smoke with her. Not after she happened upon her mother one high school night when she was sneaking in late. There was her mother, alone on the back porch. The night was chilly, and she only had on her satin robe that matched her nightie underneath. Faith waited behind the fence and, through a crack, she watched the flickering red glow of her mother's cigarette rise, glow brighter, then fall. Faith was mesmerized by the rhythmic pattern. Though her mother never knew she was there, Faith felt like that moment connected them just a little more. There was her mother, being careful not to let anyone in, just sitting and enjoying it alone.

After lunch, the girls and Hart hitched up the saddles and rode out onto the ranch. Faith felt slightly uncomfortable until she saw Hart and Toni gallop away for fun, racing

each other. Faith studied the way they braced their legs and stood just above the horses' movement. She heeled her horse hard in the sides and leaned forward above the horse's pace. Hart and Toni waited at the top of a small hill, but they looked beyond Faith as she approached.

"What is it?" She asked, a little breathless.

"We're waiting on Kat. She's left behind." Sure enough, Kat was slowly moseying toward them. Her horse kept trying to turn back towards the stable, and she was straining the keep him walking forward. Faith had forgotten that Kat was back there, and she looked silly.

"She's scared." Faith said.

"She's trying not to be, " Hart responded. At that moment, Kat jarred the horse with her heels, and he stopped completely. Toni let out a burst of laughter that she quickly smothered.

"Sorry, but it is kinda funny. I'll go help her."

Gradually, the sky got darker as they roamed the ranch, and Faith wondered if they would see stars. She thought the night before had been rather lovely, though Toni was disappointed. Since there are no other houses around, the only light on the ranch comes from the moon. Last night, the moon was so full and bright, its light covered up all the stars. Faith liked the way the moon shone all by itself in a thick blanket of black. It looked strong and powerful all alone. Privately, she hoped that the moon would be the same tonight. She felt no need to see stars, because the moon was so magnificent on its own.

In one of the small canyons, the riders came across a swimming hole. A fence of tall, rigid grass and cattails surrounded the quiet pool of water. Someone had set a slat of wood on a metal stand to serve as a homemade diving board.

"This is where my mom and Hart's dad used to swim." Toni said as they rode closer. Faith winced when she saw something move in the water, which sent ripples cascading to the edges of the grass.

"Who wants to go for a swim?" Hart boomed. Faith shrunk down on her saddle.

"I don't think so," Kat responded shyly, and Faith was glad she said it. She just took a shower after falling on the dirt. There was no way she would get into filthy, pest infested water.

Hart tied up his horse and jumped up onto the diving board staring down at the brown water. He and Toni looked more like brother and sister than cousins. Their trace of Native American ancestry beamed from their skin. Hart's facial features were intricately defined, and his jaw was square and solid. His tall height and broad shoulders balanced off his long legs. Both Toni and Hart had dark hair, though Hart's eyes were also dark while Toni's were a bright blue. Faith often wished that she were as tall as Toni, who used her height to walk with power. Yet she was happy not to be as short as Kat whose 5, 2" stature did not compensate for Kat's hesitant personality. It was an awful thought to have about a friend, so she kept it to herself.

"Hart, come on. We should go in, it's getting dark," Toni called. Without waiting for him to respond, Toni turned her horse towards Faith and Kat. "Do you want to go in?" Her question was more a command than a suggestion. They followed her, side by side, in a line of three walking up the sloping canyon side toward a purple sky.

"I can't stop thinking about that cow." Kat sighed. Faith thought about it, too. The cow's last breath fascinated her. It was so slow and exhausted. A sigh of failure. Maybe it was a breeze or her imagination, but in the stifled silence under the Texas sun, she could almost see the cow's soul drifting away. For a moment, death lost its normal façade of gloom and became surreal. Faith was standing on the edge of something she couldn't understand but wanted to. Her father was a preacher in Spartanburg at its largest Baptist congregation. He often preached about death to a nodding crowd of worshippers. They held up their hands and gave 'Amens' of agreement, and Faith used to yawn and nod with them. However, as she stood around with four other people and witnessed a cow sigh its last breath, no one was holding up a hand or an 'Amen.' She didn't feel the same way in the presence of death as she did in its description. It was strange and quiet. Her mind drifted to the idea of her parents dying. She didn't want to think about that, when suddenly, she thought about Kat.

"How are you doing?" Faith whispered quietly, unsure if she wanted to know the answer.

"I'm ok," Kat offered with a weak smile, but then again, everything about Kat seemed a little weak. As they reached the house, the sky was dark enough to reveal the first and brightest stars peeping out from the heavens, and Faith looked around for the moon.

Chapter 3

The amble of the horse made Toni feel peaceful and composed. She hadn't been to the ranch for a couple of years, and she didn't realize how much she missed riding a horse. It was different than driving a car. A car would turn wherever and whenever it is instructed. But a horse was another animal with a will all its own. Her favorite detail about a horse was that it could sense fear, which meant it could also sense confidence. For Toni, riding a horse was a test of wills, a game that she could win. Sometimes, she would zigzag the horse right and left, right and left, just to make sure she still had control.

The ranch house was in sight, and Toni was pleased to see the stars that were budding in the night sky. As she laid her head back, the horse beneath her took off in a gallop; it was happy to see the stable where it could rest. Toni gripped the reigns with one hand and the saddle horn with the other. She pulled back roughly and yelled for the horse to stop, which it did, but Toni shook slightly with the anger of being caught off guard. She cleared her head determined not to let it happen again. Kat's horse, at seeing Toni's horse speed up, took the opportunity to do so, too. Toni turned to discover Kat's terrified face speeding toward her, so she pulled her horse in the way to slow the other one down. Faith was a few feet away staring at the sky.

"These are the stars that we missed the first night," Toni explained while gripping the reigns of Kat's horse to head him straight. "Just wait for it to get a little darker."

After the girls let their horses go in the stable yard, Kat grabbed her camera.

"Where's Hart? I want him to get some pictures of us here before we leave tomorrow."

"Don't ask me." Toni shrugged. Hart was always going off by himself at the ranch. He spent every summer working as a ranch hand for Granddaddy, but every year he acted as if he's never seen the place before. She glanced around at the dimming land thinking that he better get in before it gets too dark. Granddaddy always told her to be in the house at night. If she didn't get back in time, she'd wish she were outside with the coyotes.

"Who wants some dinner?" Granddaddy's husky voice boomed from inside the screen door. He strolled outside with his hands on his back. He looked older, but work on a ranch doesn't allow a person to grow weak. His sun-tanned shoulders still had grooves of muscles under the skin, and despite the beer he drank, his stomach hadn't turned into a gut.

"As long as there's beer," Faith joked flirtatiously with Granddaddy.

"Bud heavy for me," Kat said, walking to the porch. Toni couldn't tell if she was joking or not.

"Rough day, Kid?" Granddaddy asked. Kat nodded. She was obviously unnerved by the horseback riding. Toni thought Kat had done fairly well considering she hardly had any experience. Kat grew up in Pennsylvania near the port of Lake Erie, and she hardly knew how to drive a boat let alone a horse. Toni hoped the trip might be good for Kat who had recently lost her father. When Faith mentioned the idea, Toni immediately felt the need to go. With law school deadlines approaching and interviews lined up, she wanted to get away one last time before she became absorbed in stress. Her family was already applying the pressure. Unlike Kat, Toni felt like she had five fathers. Her dad, her three brothers, and Granddaddy. Each of them had an influence in the person she was

today. Tough, independent, and assertive, she had to prove herself in a family of men. They each insisted and lectured about how, when, and where she needed to go to law school. Leaving for a while would help her sort everything out on her own. She had to endure Granddaddy, but Hart was different. He never criticized her or pushed advice onto her. Often, he went along with whatever she wanted to do. When Toni noticed Faith eyeing him, she found herself growing very protective. It's not as if Faith meant to hurt anyone, but she often did. She marveled at how long her relationship with Hunter had lasted, and she sometimes wondered if Faith even liked him.

Hart finally walked through the door as everyone else ate dinner. Toni waited for Granddaddy to get upset about him walking in late, but instead he just handed Hart a plate. Since Gammy died before Toni could remember, Granddaddy did all the cooking and cleaning. He did everything to take care of that house except decorate. That had been neglected since Gammy decorated in the seventies. The linoleum kitchen floor was a painful pea green that clashed against the burnt orange rug in the living room. There was a couch that was protected by a rust-colored cover. On the side table sat an olive green, knitted lampshade, and on the other side of the cramped room there was a loveseat completely made with horsehair.

"What happened to you?" Toni asked. She didn't want to get Hart in trouble, but if it had been her walking in-

"I decided to take a slow ride over the east side of the canyon. You girls came at a nice time of year. The colors don't last that long in a Texas summer, and I wanted to see them before they fade." Hart sat down quietly, and Toni glanced at Granddaddy who kept eating. She felt a pulse of heat in her face. She wanted him to look outside, or at his

watch, or at the fact that they were eating dinner. Anything to let her know that he would preach to anyone else who dared come in late. Granddaddy just kept eating.

"Hart, you can have mine if you want. I'm not hungry." Toni slid the plate away from her receiving stunned glances from Kat and Faith who then looked at each other.

"What's the matter, Gal? Ya not gonna eat what I made?" Granddaddy's voice seemed so warm and gentle.

"I'm just not hungry." She forced a smile then walked into the bedroom. The window was open, and the night air breezed in. It was a striking contrast to the heat of the day, and she could hear a vacant wind blowing outside. She wasn't hungry. She sunk into the quilt on the queen-sized bed that she, Faith, and Kat shared last night. Hart scared them all to death when he got up for a glass of water. Kat thought it was a ghost.

"Could it be your Grandmother?" Faith whispered nervously. They were all silent until Kat heard the refrigerator door shut. She got up to go investigate with Faith and Kat close behind her. When she reached the kitchen, the room was black and no one was there. It was too soon for Hart to have made it to the basement door, and she hadn't heard his footsteps going down the stairs. Toni wondered if it really was her Grandmother. The only way she knew Gammy was by the old black and white photos of her at the rodeos. She was a champion rider. Gammy's control over the horses was unchallenged until she left to have children. After her children were out of school, she couldn't keep away from her love of riding. A year after Gammy went back to the rodeo, a young horse flipped her off its back, and she landed just under the hooves.

Goosebumps sprinkled over Toni's entire body when she thought about the story. No one had ever told her the details about Gammy's death. Instead, she stumbled across a

newspaper clipping two years ago that reported the death. Until now, Toni had not been back to the ranch, and for one rare moment, she was scared.

"Did you hear that?" Faith murmured. Toni could feel Faith's heated breath on her neck. Then, a waft of chilled air blew in her face. She jerked to a stop just as Hart burst on the lights from the far end of the kitchen.

"Hey!" He yelled. He was smiling, but there was a foreboding glint in his dark irises. Faith screamed and clutched Toni, and all three girls stood frozen in the middle of the kitchen.

"You scared me." Hart laughed and held up his glass of water. "Were you thirsty, too?"

"No!" Toni said exasperated after she found her voice again. "We were scared half to death, and we were coming to find out what was in here."

"Oh, sorry about that." Hart apologized. It took a moment for everyone to relax so that Toni could make introductions. She glanced around looking for an open window. She thought she had felt a breeze on her face. She spotted the one window in the kitchen, and it was closed. She turned to introduce Hart to Faith and Kat. Faith only wore a t-shirt and her underwear, but she didn't seem to mind.

Toni smiled when she thought about their embarrassment.

"What are you thinking about?" Kat asked, walking into the bedroom. She sat unobtrusively on the edge of the bed where Toni lay staring at the ceiling.

"I was just thinking about how dumb we all looked last night." She didn't mean it to be amusing, but Kat let out her low, pleased giggle. Kat laughed at a lot of things Toni said.

"Granddaddy is serving up the desert, and I wanted to see if you were hungry yet." Kat motioned towards the kitchen, but Toni hesitated.

"Did Granddaddy send you in here?" She asked. Kat looked perplexed over what would be the best answer.

"Actually, he did?" She said hopefully.

"Okay." Toni followed Kat back into the kitchen. Her dinner was waiting for her, and Granddaddy had reheated it in the microwave.

After dinner, Kat whipped out a pack of cards and dropped them on the table.

"Who's up for a game of yukor?" She asked.

"Of course." Toni nodded and pulled them out of their box to shuffle.

"I forgot this place doesn't have cable," Faith moaned. "Alright, Toni, be my partner," She said, sitting down opposite from her at the table.

"Well, I need a partner then," Kat said, and she looked at Hart who looked over his shoulder.

"Me?" He asked. "What the heck is it?"

"Great!" Kat teased. "I've already lost." Toni admired the way Kat was opening up to Hart and Granddaddy. It took her a little time, but she was finally coming around. She was the same way when Toni met her freshman year at Longwood. They had a Psychology class together, and Kat sat in the back of the room. Normally, Toni sat in the

front of the class to make a good impression on the teacher. However, one day, she ran in late, and was forced to take a seat near Kat.

"Did I miss much?" Toni asked the plain, quiet girl. She had never seen Kat before even though they just finished midterms.

"He…" She began to answer, but the minute the young teacher, Professor Burke, turned to the class, she was afraid to speak. Toni received her answer over a span of fifteen minutes.

"said that…we have to…to…turn in…the paper…next week…instead of…this week." Toni was reading the girl's thin, pale lips. She had limp brown hair that still looked baby fine, and her brown eyes were shaped like a cartoon characters', naive and droopy.

When class was over, Toni invited Kat over to study, which was only a decoy. After Kat opened her lips, Toni was determined to dig out the hidden personality in this girl. Faith was Toni's roommate, and together they lured Kat out into the world. Kat went wild for a little while until she left herself vulnerable to a guy that hurt her. Toni lectured and lectured to Faith and Kat about trusting in men and always being careful. Somehow Toni didn't listen to her own advice two years later when she started dating a professor at the University. Though she attempted to tell Faith and Kat, she never did. Instead she rationalized that it was only for fun so it didn't matter if anyone knew or not. Then she couldn't stop thinking about him on the trip. She promised herself that she would stop all that nonsense, but instead, she had to resist calling him.

"Jacks are trump, Aces are high." Kat explained to Hart who looked very confused. "We'll play a practice round, and no signaling between teams!" Kat shook her

finger playfully at Faith and Toni. Yukor was their favorite game, but unfortunately it required four players. Normally, the girls would sit on campus and ask complete strangers to play with them. Every once in a while, someone would happen by that knew how to play, but most of the time, the girls found they had to teach someone or give up on the idea of playing that day.

"It's a forgotten art," Kat complained. "Nobody plays cards anymore, and even fewer know how to play yukor."

"You sound like my grandmother." Faith laughed.

The group of four played yukor for hours as the moon and stars burned outside. They drank beer and laughed and drank some more, and their conversations grew more open, more truthful, and more daring. Eventually, the cards were abandoned.

"What's your biggest fear?" Hart asked them as he cracked open another can. Faith spoke up quickly.

"Getting divorced." Everyone looked at her confused.

"Why?" Kat asked. "Your parents are still together."

"I know, but I'd rather stay in a loveless marriage than nothing at all. If you're married, at least you have someone." Faith shrugged.

"But sometimes loving yourself is more important." Toni laid her hand very sincerely on Faith's.

"Thank you, Hallmark card." Faith laughed, and Toni drew back defensively.

"Do you think speaking the truth is more important than sparing someone's feelings?" Toni glared at Faith as she said this.

"I think if you can't say something kind, you should at least be vague," Kat replied, and Toni kept quiet.

"What's your biggest fear, To-To?" Hart asked, calling her a name he hadn't used in years.

"The name To-To." She laughed. This produced some grins, but everyone was still interested in the original question. "I don't have any." She shrugged.

"That can't be true." Faith sighed. "Everyone does."

"Well." Toni knew she had to say something. "I guess it's being left in the dark. I like to know what is going on." She nodded satisfied and looked at Hart. "What's yours?"

"Losing the ranch." Hart frowned. "I want it to always be in the family."

"Kat?" Hart asked. "Your turn."

"Myself," She mumbled. They all looked at her. "Because if I don't like who I turn out to be, I'm stuck."

"You can always change your life," Toni suggested. Kat shook her head.

"You can't change where you come from, so how can you change where you're going?" Kat turned her beer can up to drain it.

"That's ridiculous." Toni grew frustrated. "They're two different things."

"Do you like who you are now?" Hart asked, cautiously. Faith was completely speechless.

"Do you ever forget what you look like?" Kat replied. Hart, Faith, and Toni shook their heads uncertainly. "I hate it when I do."

After cards, they clambered into bed at three thirty in the morning.

"We're going to regret this." Toni mumbled, wiggling under the covers. Kat collapsed onto the bed and lay still for a moment before crawling under, too. The breeze from the window wafted over Toni's face and a pile of thoughts bombarded her at once. She thought of her five fathers, and Gammy, and Professor Burke. Suddenly, her stomach churned, and she rushed to the bathroom. After she vomited, she laid her cheek on the cold tile, and she couldn't lift her head for the rest of the night.

Chapter 4

"You've got to be kidding me," Toni grumbled as Kat leaned over her and tried to wake her up. "What time is it?"

"It's seven thirty," Kat whispered. The girls planned to leave at seven that morning, and right at seven o'clock, Kat's eyes sprung open. She was an early riser with a built in alarm clock that she despised. She wanted to sleep and sleep until the late hours of the morning when everyone else was already up and breakfast was almost getting cold. She wondered how someone could sleep so late. She enviously wanted to have dreams so mesmerizing that she wouldn't want to wake up either. Actually, she could never remember dreaming at all. At least not at night. Her dreams came at the most inconvenient times, like during a class lecture or reading an assigned book, but almost never at night.

Toni's bloodshot eyes rolled up at Kat before she gripped her mouth and lunged for the toilet bowl. Kat never heard Toni get up to go to the bathroom, and when she found her on the floor, she feared for a moment that Toni was dead.

"What have I done to myself?" Toni groaned and stared at the toilet water as it cycloned down the bowl.

"I can't find Faith," Kat blurted. Toni's eyes jerked toward her wide and confused.

"What do you mean you can't find Faith?"

"I don't know where she is. She never came to bed last night." By the look in Toni's eyes, Kat felt like she lost Faith. Toni scrambled uneasily to her feet. Her face was pale and sweaty. She mumbled something under her breath as they walked out the door.

Kat stuck close behind Toni who headed straight for the basement and plodded heavily down the white, wooden stairs. Her steps echoed throughout a room that felt colder and colder as they descended. Piles of boxes and wooden scraps lined the walls. In one corner, there was a showerhead on the wall and a drain on the open floor. No tub, no curtain, just a chain dangling in the air. A ping-pong table leaned against the far wall, and in the middle of the basement, under a hanging, naked light bulb, sat a double bed. There was a clump of covers piled directly in the middle of the mattress. Toni stopped abruptly at the bedside and folded her arms across her stomach. Her arm muscles almost quivered from being held so tight.

"Good morning, you two," Toni announced to the covers in a flat, unemotional tone. Kat's heart beat against her chest. She realized that she didn't want to be here feeling strange and embarrassed. She glanced at the stairs to see just how far it would be to run.

"Maybe we shouldn't wake them." She tried to coax Toni with a gentle whisper, but Toni threw her hand out and thrust off the covers just as if Kat wasn't in the room.

Lost in a hard sleep and clutching a pillow, Faith lay exposed and alone in the middle of the bed. She cringed under the cold air that attacked her skin and struggled to open her eyes.

"What the hell?" She demanded, and her hand flopped around trying to retrieve the warm quilts.

"Where's Hart?" Toni was stunned. So was Kat.

"I don't know." Faith was unpleasant in the mornings. Now her face was drawn up in an angry scowl. Kat hauled the covers back over Faith and hastened to the stairs.

"I'm going to start packing the car." She hurried away from the arguing that arose behind her.

Still in her pajamas, Kat wandered outside to see the after effects of the sunrise. A bright yellow color tinted everything in view and dew sprinkled the grass. Kat sucked in a long and thirsty breath, and stretched her arms above her head. The breath turned into a deep yawn, and she reached further feeling each of her vertebrae extend. It felt good to take up as much room as she wanted. She dropped her head back and let her arms flop lazily to her sides. The air was cool, almost chilly. A horse whinnied from the stable next to the house.

"You wanna talk, huh?" Kat asked happily. She strolled over to the fence where a horse was standing nearby. "Come here, you." She beckoned. The horse eyed her, and she relaxed her shoulders. Her face muscles felt calm, and she kept her hand out as an offering. The horse took a few hesitant steps toward her.

"That's pretty good." A voice spoke up behind her. She practically fell off the fence trying to turn around as Hart approached.

"Do you always have to scare me like that?" She laughed. "Where the heck did you come from anyways?"

"I was asleep on the couch. The screen door woke me up when you walked through. If you noticed me, I wouldn't scare you." He stepped up onto the fence next to her and called the horse. The horse trotted over easily. As Hart patted its nose, Kat wondered why she had to be so scared all the time. She was trying so hard not to let the horse know she was scared. Obviously, it was something she couldn't hide.

"You were doing pretty good, there." Hart nodded at the horse. Kat shrugged.

"He still knew I was scared." She squinted her eyes in the direction of the sun, testing her endurance.

"I don't think that's true." Hart leaned both his elbows onto the fence and tilted his head to look up at her. "I don't think you were scared."

"Well, the horse came to you, not me."

"Because I usually feed him." Hart laughed. "He knows he can get food from me." Kat's thought about her ride yesterday. She was frustrated that just at the end of the ride, she finally understood the rhythm of the horse, and then the ride was over. She glanced down at Hart who was waiting for her to look at him

"He's more scared of you than you are of him." Hart smiled. Kat's inconvenient daydream had interrupted her thoughts so for a moment, she wasn't sure whom Hart was talking about. Kat glanced down at her shoes.

"Kat!" Toni's voice called from inside the house.

"Thanks, Hart." The shadow of a smile curved her lips before she headed into the house. Toni and Faith were in the back bedroom getting their things together.

"We've got to get going," Toni said.

"We have no schedule," Faith argued, trying to calm Toni down. Kat loaded her things onto her shoulders and grabbed one of Toni's bags, too.

"Let's get on the road then!" She said encouragingly.

When they pulled the Volvo down the long drive, brown dust scattered into the air. Granddaddy woke up to say goodbye, but Hart was no where to be found when the girls left. Toni gave up the driving to Faith so she could lay down in the backseat.

"I'm never drinking again." A pillow muffled her words.

"You and every other college kid." Faith laughed. She gestured to the cooler behind her that took up half the backseat. 'Drink some water, you need it."

"I don't understand you, Kat." Toni said grabbing a bottle of water.

"I guess I got good sleep." Kat shrugged.

"I did too." Faith agreed. Kat wondered about the sleep that Faith got. She wanted to know where Faith went after she went to sleep, and how Faith ended up in Hart's bed. Kat kept her thoughts to herself.

No one felt like listening to music. Instead, Toni fell asleep as Faith drove along the other half of the Texas panhandle. Kat noticed a storm erupting in the flattened distance. The weather was clear and sunny over the Volvo, but Kat kept staring out the window at the dark patch of sky miles away. Every time lightening shot into the storm, the pelting rain was clearly illuminated for a brief moment. Kat hoped the lovely storm would stay lovely and away from her. She laid her head on the shoulder strap of the seatbelt so she could continue to watch it brew. Faith was humming a song behind her. Though Kat didn't know what it was, the melody was pleasant, and soon her breathing became easier, slower, deeper.

At the New Mexico state line, passing semi-trucks rattled the parked Volvo and woke Kat from her nap. She brushed her hair out of her face and wearily massaged the snooze lines that the seatbelt left streaked across her cheek. Yawning, she drooped her head to the right where she came face to face with Toni who had squatted beside her seat to pee.

"What's going on?" Kat jerked back and her eyes darted around. Faith stood behind Toni to take a picture of the 'Welcome to New Mexico' sign that loomed over them.

"We're almost to the ranch." Toni smiled, standing to hoist her soccer shorts.

"And, you fell asleep at shotgun, therefore, your privileges have been revoked for the rest of the day." Faith strolled over and tossed Kat's camera into her lap. She slipped down her high-cut khaki shorts to squat between the two open car doors that had become their roadside restroom.

"What?" Kat was still trying to wake up.

"The number one rule of shotgun is to stay awake with the driver," Faith instructed, but her words were drowned out by the blare of a trucker's horn as he flew past and shook the car. Disgusted, Toni threw her hands up in protest, but the trucker disappeared down the road before his horn stopped resonating in their skulls. Toni turned to Faith and Kat with an angry expression.

"That is my pet peeve." She groaned and dropped into the driver's seat.

"He was probably just overwhelmed by our breath-taking beauty and didn't know what else to do." Faith pulled up her shorts and widened her eyes with a playful smile.

"Or it could be because you had your pants down." Kat smiled and jumped into the backseat before Faith could do anything.

"I'm serious." Toni huffed. When everyone was in the car, she pulled back onto the road. "I think the pathetic reason that some men honk and gesture on the road is to boost their own ego. They can drive off before they get rejected. Then we're left feeling strange and cheap and exposed."

"Faith *was* exposed." Kat was unable to hold in her comment, and she fell back against her seat with a hand clasped over her mouth to hold in her laughter.

"Toni, I think that you think about it too much," Faith suggested more delicately than Kat would have expected. "I like feeling attractive and pretty."

"There's a difference between being attractive and being respected." Toni mumbled. The radio broke the risen tension in the air with a crackling alarm that the girls had reached an area between signals. Faith fumbled with it and found one clear Spanish station.

"No other stations will reach." Faith pushed the roam button again, and the station numbers flashed by on the radio face before stopping on the same station.

"Where are we?" Kat was astonished that only one radio station was clear, and it wasn't even English.

"We're in New Mexico!" Faith said swaying to the Spanish beat. "I kinda like it." She made dramatic hip movements bouncing along with the Latin beat, and she looked like she was sitting on hot coals. Then abruptly, she stopped and turned to Toni and Kat.

"I can't stand it anymore." She announced. "I have to have a cigarette." She grabbed her makeup case from the backseat and rummaged around in the bottom of it.

"You smoke?" Kat asked amazed.

"Yup." Faith seemed vibrant and released. Toni held out her hand.

"I'll take one, too." She smiled. Faith squealed happily.

"What about you, Kat?" She asked, dangling one in Kat's face and acting as if it were a chocolate brownie. "Yum, yum!"

"No thanks." Kat frowned. So she sat and watched Toni and Faith blow the smoke freely out the window.

Chapter 5

Though it was called The Painted Desert, Faith didn't think it looked painted at all. The New Mexico landscape wasn't a flat creation brought about by someone else's hand. Not what Faith saw flashing like bursts of flames outside her window. These rocks were smoldering and burning. They were alive with a heat and radiance that was a part of them, not slapped on like paint. Most of the land sloped and rolled, falling onto itself while catching itself. In places where sharp edges stood rigid and tall, she was certain that someone had tampered with the natural beauty trying to hide something.

As Faith gazed at the rolling red rocks, a roar erupted from the backseat where Kat rolled down her window. The current of hot wind made the girls' hair lash out like whips against their faces.

"Kat! Please roll up the window!" Faith cried as she tried to gather her hair behind her head and choked on stray strands in the process.

"I need a clear shot of this." Kat stated calmly. Faith could barely hear her over the screaming highway. She twisted around and saw Kat leaning intently on the spot where the window disappeared into the door. Kat's grip on the camera faded her fingertips white, but her face looked as calm as if she was in quiet isolation hundreds of miles from a busy interstate. She chewed her bottom lip while concentrating and snapped one shot.

"I hope that turns out." She sighed and fell back on the seat. Faith reached back and rolled up the window.

"You can't take a good picture in a speeding car," Faith said.

"Depends on what you think is a good picture," Kat replied. Faith glanced again at the colors of golds and reds that swirled outside the glass.

"A good picture is what would capture the peaceful atmosphere of this landscape. A great picture would include the way that peacefulness makes you feel. A great picture is impossible."

"My idea was different." Kat began. "I wanted to get a slight blur on the sides of these rocks to show how we are passing by magnificent beauty too quickly."

"Do you want to know my idea?" Toni asked, then continued without waiting for an answer. "I think that a great picture is not made of what the artist intends for it, but what the viewer brings to it." Faith jerked her head in Toni's direction.

"You heard that somewhere," She accused.

"In my art appreciation class two semesters ago." Toni smiled. Faith laughed, and she often wondered how Kat could stare into that camera for hours and possibly never take a picture. Faith decided she would shoot and shoot and shoot plenty of rolls of film to make sure she never missed anything. One good picture out of twenty-three bad ones is one good picture she might have passed over without knowing. Faith couldn't stand the idea of what might have been possible. She could never pass up a chance for excitement.

"Look, a mirage." Toni pointed out the windshield. The road stretched so straight and far that the girls could see where the sides of the two-lane road seemed to come together. Just at that spot, there was what looked like a pool of water that jiggled under the pressing sun.

"Could you imagine actually being lost in the desert and seeing something like that?" Faith asked in amazement. "You'd go out of your mind."

The sun eventually came down just as it had on the first stretch of their drive, but this time, it came directly in front of them with blinding fury.

"My sunglasses do nothing," Toni complained.

"It's like the sun is standing in our way," Kat said thoughtfully. Faith closed a hand over her eyes and tried to help Toni watch the road.

"Maybe we should go ahead and stop for the night." She made the suggestion for Toni's benefit, but Toni only huffed.

"Albuquerque." Toni said. "That's where our plans say to stop and that's where I am going to stop."

"We could stop now and just get started earlier tomorrow." As Faith offered this eagerly, the Volvo came up behind a slow moving driver on the narrow, two-lane highway.

"Of all times." Toni sighed. She craned her neck to see around the driver.

"Go for it!" Faith said to Toni because her insides had yearned for her to say just the opposite.

"I don't think-" Kat's voice trailed off as Toni stepped on the gas petal to hurl the Volvo into the other lane. As they sped along, the weight of all their over packed suitcases kept the car from accelerating effectively.

"Come on, come on." Toni muttered as she gripped the steering wheel. The car pulled along side of the other car, and Faith began to breathe easier. Then just over a small hill in the approaching distance, a semi-truck rattled up and towards them.

"There's a-" Kat's voice trailed off again.

"A truck, there's a truck!" Faith repeated frantically. She pulled her legs up into the seat as if she could back away from the semi. Toni's face turned red as she held her pressure on the gas petal. They inched slowly around the other car with the semi hurtling towards them.

"Hurry!" Faith cried. The truck appeared to grow in size as the distance between them narrowed. Faith squeezed her eyes tight. A few uncertain seconds passed by before she felt the car veer to the right. Her eyes hurt when she opened them. She decided she was still alive, yet silence loomed behind her. She turned and was relieved to find Toni and Kat still there, despite expressions of trauma that gripped their faces.

"Is everyone alright?" Toni's question came out as an apology.

"Alive." Faith sighed. She collapsed against her seat nearly exhausted from the tension.

"Albuquerque, 15 miles." Toni reported.

"Thank God!" Faith threw her arms into the air. "Can I get an Amen?"

"Amen!" Toni and Kat yelled together. Faith laughed along with them. The more she thought about what happened, the harder she laughed until tears squeaked out of her eyes. She laughed and laughed. Since she didn't know where the laughter came from, she couldn't stop it. She thought about Hunter, and his face mixed with Hart's in her mind. She didn't stop laughing until Kat laid a hand on her arm.

"Faith?" She asked, trying to conceal her amusement. "Why are you still laughing?" Faith rotated around. Kat's face was twisted with delight.

"I don't know." Faith laughed some more.

"Alright, we're all delirious." Toni said holding a hand in the air as if to suppress the uncontrollable giggles. "As Granddaddy would say, it's time to relax. Beer or booze?"

The lights of Albuquerque lit up the sky more than Faith expected. The complete opposite from the ranch, the sky glowed in a little dome over the city. Toni pulled off at a random exit, and they searched down the nearest hotel.

"How much?" Kat choked when Toni got back in the car.

"A room is eighty-nine dollars a night plus ten dollars per extra person." Toni sighed.

"You have got to be kidding me! For a lousy free breakfast?" Faith cried.

"Well, there's that other hotel at fifty a night. And I have an idea." Toni's eyes lit up. "You two can sneak in while I pay for it." Kat shrunk into her seat, but Faith was too tired to be nervous.

"What do we do?" She asked.

"I'll pay for the room and let you two in the back door. That shouldn't be difficult." Toni said.

The back of the hotel was dim and dank. Faith and Kat tapped their feet and rocked on their heels.

"I need a bed." Faith moaned. "A big, soft, bed."

"Shhh." Kat whispered and glanced around. "I think there might be cameras." Faith rolled her eyes and continued to watch the door that Kat wouldn't let her get near. They were going to have to run as soon as it was open. Kat thought that there would certainly be a video camera by that door.

Finally, it swung open, and Toni's head bobbed around before she spotted Faith and Kat hurling themselves at her.

"Whoa!" She laughed as they slammed the door closed. Kat's face was shook in terror.

"Where is it?" Kat hissed.

"Right here." Toni smiled. "We got lucky. It's right at the door."

Toni opened the door and flipped on the light. That familiar hotel smell of newly washed sheets and settled dusting wafted toward them. They strolled in and stopped. There was only one king sized bed. Faith dropped her bags and crumpled on top of them.

"I'll just sleep here." She moaned. Toni nudged her in the leg.

"It's bigger than the one at Granddaddy's," She said hopefully.

"Who's sleeping in the middle?" Faith lifted her head just high enough to peer onto the bed. Kat pulled on her plaid pajamas and crawled into the bed.

"I will. Same as last time," She said, kicking the covers to loosen them. Kat leaned into her pillow, and her head sunk out of Faith's sight. Faith's body ached with a need for sleep. Kat's sigh of comfort made Faith give in. She quickly kicked off her shorts and crawled under the covers in just the tank top and underwear she had worn all day. Lying completely straight, she tried to focus on something other than her desire to sprawl her arms and fling her leg over a pillow, which was how she usually slept. After Toni turned off the lights, Faith breathed deep and felt the coolness of the pillow beneath her head with her cheek. For a few soft moments, everything was quiet.

"Did you get enough sleep last night?" Kat asked cautiously.

"Yes, why?" Faith's eyes popped open. She didn't know why Kat asked her that. Kat was silent for a moment.

"I was just wondering."

"Why?" Faith demanded, rolling over. Kat propped herself up on her elbow. Toni laid the pillow over her head.

"I'm curious as to what happened to you after I went to bed." Kat shrugged. Her voice sounded casual enough.

"I didn't want to sleep in a crowded bed anymore, so Hart offered his," Faith answered defensively. She couldn't quite see Kat's face except for a line of light that streamed through a crack in the curtain and landed on Kat's chin.

"O.K." Then Kat lay back down without saying another word. Faith turned over and buried her head in the pillow. Last night, when Kat and Toni went into the other room, Hart was cleaning up some of the beer cans and scattered cards that were left. To be helpful, Faith decided to help him. She didn't want him to do it all alone. After they were done, she asked him to sit with her while she smoked a cigarette. They wandered onto the porch to sit on the steps. Stars spotted the late night sky. It was still early enough to be thickly dark, but the sun would be coming up soon.

"You're lucky." Faith sighed and took a drag of her cigarette.

"And why is that?" Hart asked kindly. He leaned against the railing on the stairs and gazed out into the night.

"You get to live out here," Faith said. "You're away from the nonsense of who said what and who dates who. In Spartanburg, that's my life. I'm a little fish in the fish bowl of knowledge, and everyone can see me. Hart nodded and grinned.

"I know how that is," He said. "I may live here in the summer, but I do live in actual civilization during the year." Faith grinned and gently let a drag drift through her lips. Her hand ran through her hair, and she held it at the nape of her neck. Hart's hands rested on his knees, and with her eyes, Faith traced the veins that poked out through the delicate skin.

"Why do you come here then?" Faith asked.

"To get away," Hart replied evenly. "Comin' out here lets me get away and be alone. Comin' out here reminds me of who I am. Sometimes a person can lose himself in the who said what and who dates who, though they didn't mean to."

Faith thought about his words again as she lay in the Albuquerque hotel bed. The stream of light from the window fell onto her eye. At the time that Hart said this, all Faith could think about was how much she wanted to press her lips against his instead of against the cigarette. She smiled with her eyes and traced her neck with her finger, but Hart looked deep in thought as he gazed at nothing in the dark. She finally couldn't resist laying a hand on his. She wanted to press in the veins that popped off his hand like wrinkles in a bed sheet. He smiled, squeezed her hand, then rose and waited for her at the door. She dashed out her cigarette with her shoe and followed him quietly through the dark house, down the rickety wooden stairs, to the basement. His bed was the only thing that didn't look like a regular basement. He pulled back the covers and motioned for her to crawl into them.

"You can have my bed tonight," He said. She was confused.

"I can't do that," She said. "Where are you going to sleep?"

"I've gotta a couch upstairs callin' my name." He motioned again. Faith crawled in and let him drape the covers over her.

"You're a nice gal," He said before leaving to go back upstairs. It wasn't long before the next thing she knew, a blast of cold air woke her up. As first Faith thought she imagined the red in Toni's eyes.

"What the hell?" Toni asked looking around.

"Exactly. What the hell?" Faith cried back.

"Where's my cousin?" Toni asked.

"Upst-"

"Did you do anything to him? What time did you go to bed? How did you end up down here?" Toni reeled off her questions like credits in a movie. Faith was consumed with embarrassment, but all that showed in her face was anger.

"How can you ask me that? Does it look like he's here?" Faith's couldn't tell if she was angry of being accused or angry because she might as well be guilty. "He slept upstairs, I slept here, nothing happened." They stared at each other for a moment until Toni's face softened.

"You're right. I'm sorry." Toni dropped her head, and Faith felt just as bad.

Faith forgot that Kat didn't know anything about it. She wondered where Kat was while they were arguing or why Kat wanted to know about it now. The questions began to eat her up inside, but she decided that she couldn't bring it up again. The guilt that she still felt was worse. So she laid in the king bed afraid to turn over yet unable to sleep because of a stream of light from the curtains that shined directly into her eyes.

Chapter 6

The 'free breakfast' sign glowed with temptation from across the street. Toni woke up before the alarm clock, and when she opened the curtains, her stomach grumbled at the sight of it. The food supply in the Volvo consisted of three bags of bagels, a jumbo jar of peanut butter, an economy sized bag of trail mix, triple chocolate granola bars, four different kinds of diet sodas, butterscotch pudding packs, and a bag of dark chocolate nuggets. Toni craved strawberries, melon, milk, eggs, and bacon. Anything perishable that wasn't stowed in or around the backseat cooler. As soon as Faith and Kat stirred slightly under the covers, Toni greeted them with the morning.

"I'm starving!" She chirped happily.

"How long have you been up?" Kat asked with a peculiar grin.

"About twenty minutes, and I decided that we must have a free breakfast." She pointed out the window.

"What are we going to do, steal it?" Faith mumbled with her face still pressed against the pillow.

"Don't say steal." Toni felt an unnatural high. "Borrow is more appropriate."

"I will not throw up anything for anybody." Faith's eyes were still closed, but she was obviously smiling against the pillow.

"They'll never even notice." Toni persisted.

After they showered, Kat and Faith snuck back out the back door of the hotel where Toni was waiting for them in the car.

"I feel like we're robbers or something." Kat said.

"Not yet." Faith pointed at Toni behind her back. Toni drove the car around the back of the other hotel. The girls looked around at the many empty parking spaces.

"Um, there's hardly anyone here," Kat said hesitantly.

"We might as well walk inside. They can't arrest us for that," Toni continued. So they parked the car and walked in a side entrance. The hallway was quiet with out-dated green carpet and busy gold wallpaper. The room doors looked so flimsy. Toni thought she could knock them down with a small tap of her big toe. Her steps seemed to echo around the hall bouncing against the walls and into her ears. They reached a closed door with windows that revealed some sort of lobby.

"It's probably in there." Faith whispered. No one moved.

"Should we go in?" Toni asked quietly. She was afraid that if she raised her voice anymore, she might wake the one hotel guest. Toni and Kat stared through the door blankly, so Toni pushed through. They followed close behind. A Mexican woman stood at the desk and glanced over at them. Toni decided not to make eye contact. Instead, she scanned the breakfast bar looking for the fresh fruit, hot eggs, and sizzling bacon that wasn't there. Instead there were sticky buns with 25-cent stickers on them, like the ones at a gas station. Four mini boxes of cheerios and two boxes of bran flakes. Some brown bananas and spotted oranges lay huddled in a basket, and a small refrigerator was shoved in the corner with a taped on sign that read 'Milk.' Disappointed, Toni picked up a sticky bun.

"Excuse me." The woman behind the desk called to them in a loud, Mexican accent. "What you do here?"

"Um," Toni stammered. "We're just getting breakfast."

"What you do here?" The woman asked again. Then she disappeared in a room behind the desk.

"Ok." Faith began. "Maybe we should go." But just as she said this, the woman dashed back out with a short, chubby Mexican man straggling behind her. His hair stood up straight on one side of his head where he had laid it on a pillow. He looked as if he had just been woken up from somewhere in that room. The woman rambled off something in Spanish, and he stumbled over to the girls. As he came nearer, Toni's entire body flexed, and she felt her hands curl into fists.

"What room?" He asked in a husky voice, but his accent was more subdued than the woman's.

"Um, excuse me?" Faith asked. She had a hand in her hair and she batted her eyes.

"Room?" He asked. "Four sixty-two or four sixty-eight?" Toni was stunned. The couple had only rented two rooms that night.

"Four sixty…" Kat started to say a room number, but her voice trailed off.

"Sir." Toni's voice was firm. "We don't have a room."

"No room? No food." He pointed vigorously at the breakfast. The woman still behind the desk rambled some more in Spanish. Toni wished she had paid better attention in her College Spanish courses. Then the woman said something that caused all of Toni's muscles to tighten again.

"I.D." She cried. The man waved at her wearily, and when he turned back to the girls, either he looked bigger or Toni felt smaller.

"Do you have I.D. numbers?" He asked. Toni knew he meant social security numbers.

"Oh, no." Faith started. "That's not necessary." She began to walk toward the door, but the man stepped in her way.

"You write down your information." He said. "Give us I.D. numbers."

"I don't have mine with me." Kat lied in a weak voice.

"Look," Toni was losing control over her voice, and she began to talk rapidly. Her heart thudded in her chest. "We're terribly sorry to have intruded. We must have been mistaken, and we're going to go now." She grabbed Kat's hand and walked around the man. Faith stepped along beside her.

"Everyone has I.D. number in the United States!" The woman called. Toni pushed open the door still grasping Kat's hand, and all three girls took off running to the car

"That was a terrible idea!" Faith yelled as they ran.

"I know!" Toni cried. "I realize that!" They piled into the Volvo and pulled out of the hotel. The man was shaking his fist at them from the lobby front door.

"We are so stupid!" Toni laughed. Her laughter grew and grew with Faith and Kat staring at her bewildered.

"This isn't funny!" Kat said breathless. "That guy wanted to arrest us."

"I can't help it." Toni gulped.

"What kind of an idea was that?" Faith asked.

"An idea to get free food," Toni replied.

"We didn't trust our instincts," Kat said. "Why didn't we trust our instincts? I know that I certainly didn't want to walk through that door. I knew something was wrong."

"It's like getting on an elevator," Faith agreed thoughtfully. "The doors open, and there is a guy standing there that makes your skin crawl, and what do you do? You get on! Why do we do stuff like that?"

"That green carpet made my skin crawl," Kat muttered, and Toni and Faith burst out laughing. Toni felt scared and relieved all at once, though she couldn't completely relax until they reached the Arizona state line.

As the car crossed into Arizona, Faith's cell phone rang, and all the girls jumped. Toni shook her head with frustration. She hated that going into that hotel was her idea. She glanced at Faith on the phone and knew right away that it was Hunter on the other line. There was something in Faith's manner. She was more rigid and impersonal. Toni made gestures in front of Faith's face to make her smile.

"Yea, we haven't had any service till now. That's why I couldn't call you," Faith cooed. Toni glanced at Kat, and they exchanged a knowing look. When she finally hung up, Toni scanned her face.

"Why did you lie to him?" She asked.

"I didn't lie, exactly," Faith replied with a shrug. Toni wanted to tell her that she was acting crazy. That she shouldn't throw away what she had with Hunter, but quickly, she swallowed her words. Her eyes glanced down to her own cell phone that sat idle beside her. She wondered if it would ring. Then she wondered what voice she would hear. She turned back to the road and squeezed the steering wheel lightly with her palms.

Here she was, driving away. This was proof that she wasn't attached, and that she could leave with ease. She resisted the thoughts that leaked into it about him. Professor Burke. Like bumping into each other at the library with awkward laughs and clumsy movements. At some point he made the suggestion of coffee. The effort was so casual that she almost missed it.

"It's nice hanging out with you," He had said one night. Toni couldn't remember where they were, what she was wearing, or what they had been talking about before he said what he said. Only his words rang in her head. "You're a sweet kid."

The words still left the taste of stomach acid in her mouth even without saying them. A kid? She was embarrassed. After that, she avoided some of his phone calls for about a week, but she didn't think he noticed. Pretty soon, she continued to see him as usual, telling herself that she was doing it for fun. She was using him. She didn't care. And now, she couldn't stop thinking about him, and she hated it.

"Sometimes, he just gets me so aggravated." Faith burst out. It took a moment for Toni to realize that Faith was talking about Hunter and that the words had not been her own thoughts.

"What happened?" Kat asked in her usual gentle voice that Toni found very comforting at the right moments.

"He told me to have a good time." Faith groaned. Kat and Toni sat stunned.

"What?" Toni cried.

"He told me to have a good time," Faith repeated. Toni didn't know what to say.

"Isn't that a good thing?" Kat asked.

"He's doing that to make me feel bad. He thinks that if he tells me to have a good time, that I'll think he has complete confidence in me. Then, I'll feel bad about looking at other guys. But I know what he's trying to do, and it's not going to work." She crossed her arms and propped her feet up on the dash in front of her.

"You got all of that from have a good time?" Toni's mouth hung wide open.

"Trust me." Faith nodded.

"Well, what if he told you not to have a good time?" Kat asked curiously.

"Then he'd at least be telling the truth, but I know better than to let someone tell me what to do," Faith replied. Toni's emotions danced around in her stomach.

"Why are you with him?" Toni asked slow and certain.

"I already told you that," Faith answered annoyed.

"No, you didn't. You're obviously not happy, and if you want to be with other guys, you shouldn't have a boyfriend," Toni said. She was angry inside. Here was Faith, reckless with a stable relationship that Toni craved.

"If I wanted someone to tell me what to do, I'd call Hunter back." Faith laughed. She was trying to brush off the conversation, and Toni feared she might burst about Professor Burke if she didn't stop as well. She couldn't talk about him, or else it would mean things had gotten out of control for her, and she couldn't allow things to get out of control.

"Toni, you turn here!" Kat yelled. The sign for the Grand Canyon flew past them, and Toni had to turn the car around.

"I wasn't paying attention." She apologized when she finally got headed in the right direction. She cleared her head and focused solely on the road, which was decorated

right and left with deer-crossing, elk-crossing, and other animal-crossing signs. Her eyes darted around, waiting for something to jump in front of the car. She was determined to be prepared.

Chapter 7

Kat leaned against the seat and let her head bounce along with the rhythm of the car. The woods that trimmed the road to the Grand Canyon were plush and deep green. They contrasted the barren desert image that Kat expected of Arizona. She sat with one leg tucked under her. When she was young, her father would tell her that it wouldn't grow if she sat on it like that. He also told her that his mustache had run up his nose when he first shaved it. He loved to joke. His laugh was deep and echoed from his pudgy belly where Kat's mother had laid her head so many times, and he'd play with her chestnut hair. As the sun fell through the trees, it warmed her face through the window, and for a moment Kat got the feeling that she was home. Then quickly, she forced it away. That wasn't how she was supposed to feel. She was on a road trip, out west, where the sun promised to transform her as it had been transformed when she watched it set. She wanted to feel somehow improved.

When they reached the cluster of hotels near the Grand Canyon, each girl expected to crawl into welcoming covers and feathery pillows. They tried the first hotel they saw and discovered it was too expensive. Then they tried the next. They even tried the gaudy, bright blue, one-story motel with wooden shutters.

"What are we going to do?" Faith sighed. Kat curled up in her seat and laid her head on her knees. She was about to suggest that they sleep in the car when a flashy, red sign caught her eye.

"The RV park." Kat laughed. "Let's go look."

Toni turned the car in that direction. They rolled through the entrance and glanced around at the big and little RV's all lined up in rows. Five large teepees were clustered in the middle of the park.

"An Indian reservation in the middle of an RV park?" Faith gasped.

"You can rent them," Toni replied.

"Uh, I think those are the bathrooms." Kat pointed to what looked like a brick box near the teepees. Light streamed out from the window slits near the roof, but it looked rather vacant.

"Alright, let's go." Toni parked the car near the shadowy office building. Faith and Kat sat still in their seats.

"Are you serious?" Faith asked laughing.

"Yea," Toni replied. "What else are we going to do?"

They tiptoed into the bathroom clutching their towels. Their flip-flops slapped their feet and echoed throughout the empty stalls. The temperature had dropped dramatically, and Kat's teeth chattered. None of the girls had warm clothes, being the middle of the summer, and none of them were prepared for the cold desert nights.

"I'm freezing," Kat said as she dropped her towel to put coins into the shower meter.

"This damn thing's broken!" Faith yelled, and her voice bounced off the walls. Kat wandered over to help. Faith tugged on the knob, and she grew red in the face. When Kat slammed her palm against it, and a loud clink confirmed that there was a quarter stuck. Faith's shower burst on and steam puffed into the air.

"It's hot!" She screamed. Snorts of laughter seeped out of Toni's stall.

"It says seven minutes." Kat thought she should tell Faith since Faith's showers could last an hour longer than that.

"Seven minutes?" Faith gasped. "I don't have time to shave my legs!"

When Kat's water burst on, the shower curtain blew completely vertical from the pressure. Terrified of running out of water, she rushed through her normal routine. Lather in the shampoo. Let lather sit and wash face. Rinse shampoo, put in conditioner. Let conditioner sit and wash body. Rinse out conditioner. Normally, Kat would also turn on the frigid cold water and lean her head back into it as a final coating rinse before stepping out, but not tonight. The air outside the shower was waiting to turn the water on her body into frost. Anyways, she hated the cold-water ritual, because it always put a damper on what was a relaxing shower. But ever since she read that rinsing with cold water adds shine, she did it almost every time.

After hopping around in the cold, Toni, Faith, and Kat passed off the hair dryer in intervals so that they didn't have to stand in the cold with wet hair for long. The floor of the teepee that they slept in that night was a flap of tarp lain on top of stiff ground. Kat shivered in her sleeping bag.

"Are you guys cold, too?" She couldn't stand it anymore. It would take hypothermia to get her asleep.

"I'm freezing," Faith agreed.

"Ok, stand up," Toni instructed. She unzipped all of their sleeping bags to make a big, communal pallet. "We can use all of our body heat."

"Were you in the girl scouts?" Faith teased.

"No. The boy scouts," Toni replied. "My brothers took me along when my mom worked."

"As long as we're warm," Kat sighed. She crawled in between Faith and Toni. Almost all three of them were in the middle of the pallet as they squeezed together.

"I always wanted to be in the girl scouts," Kat said after a few moments of silence.

"Shh!" Toni hissed, so Kat squeezed her eyes closed and tried to fall asleep.

The air was still chilly the next morning before the sun had time to warm it up again. About to descend the Dripping Springs Trail that Toni chose for them to hike, Kat feared that the smallest puff of wind might throw her right off the edge of the Canyon.

"Isn't that magnificent?" Toni looked like a mountaineer with her hands on her hips and a backpack strapped on tight. She packed bagels and raisons for them to eat at lunchtime. The brochure said that the hike was seven miles long. Toni wanted to do the nine-mile hike, but Faith and Kat talked her out of it. Then Kat glanced uneasily at her meager twenty-ounce bottle of water. The brochure also said that inside the Canyon, the temperature could reach 104 degrees. On the bus ride to the hike, Kat was nervous, but the amount of senior citizens made her feel better. She thought, if they could do it, so could she. Then, the bus stopped at a lookout point, and all of the older people got off the bus except for Toni, Faith, Kat, and a rugged-looking couple each equipped with a backpack and a gallon milk jug of water. But Toni shrugged it off, and her confidence made Kat feel somewhat reassured.

The beginning of the trail was a narrow dirt path that zigzagged down what Kat thought to be an almost completely vertical canyon wall. As she descended, her calves quivered from the pressure of keeping her body from running right off the steep cliff. However, the girls were in good spirits, and they laughed and joked. They stopped to take pictures of each other with the breathtaking view in the background, and Kat tried a few shots of cactus flowers and a stray desert lizard. A faint breeze followed them down the trail until they reached level ground and a sign with two wooden arrows. One pointed toward 'Canyon Bottom' and the other pointed to 'Dripping Springs.'

"That's our sign," Toni chirped, and she headed off to the left of the split. Kat glanced hesitantly at her watch. It had taken a little over an hour to reach this spot, and one-third of her water was already gone. She twisted to view where they had come from, and she had to lean her head far backwards. What she thought was an almost vertical trail was, in fact, completely vertical. Her neck hurt from craning to look up at the canyon wall.

"How long is this hike supposed to take?" She called after Faith and Toni who marched along the path.

"It said six or seven hours," Toni called back. Kat stopped dead in her tracks.

"What?" She cried. Toni and Faith turned around wearing confused expressions.

"What's the matter?" Faith asked casually.

"Look at your water." Kat pointed to Faith's bottle. More than one-third had been drunk. "We don't have enough."

"We'll be fine," Faith shrugged. Kat quickly glanced at Toni who had crossed her arms in thought.

"Well," Toni said. "Why don't we just keep going, and if we think we should turn around later, we will."

"*You* will?" Kat corrected. She knew Toni who was often over ambitious.

"Sure." Toni shrugged. Then she turned and continued on the trail.

An hour passed before they stopped to eat lunch. Toni spotted a rock formation that they could sit under for shade. It was the only shade around that wasn't merely dark lines traced onto the ground by the sun filtering through skeletal bushes. Kat only nibbled at her bagel. The intense heat dwindled her appetite.

"I think we should turn around," Kat suggested. Faith looked at Kat, then at Toni, then at Kat again while Toni continued to eat silently. "Toni." Kat wanted her attention.

"I know you want to go back," Toni answered, still looking down at her bagel.

"I think I want to make it there," Faith said. Kat's heart beat quickly. She wanted to burst into a sprint back up the trail just as she had wanted to take off across the ranch. Her instinct told her to run and run far.

"If it takes longer to go back up then come down." Toni glanced up in the air to think, "then on a seven-hour hike, it should only take three hours to get to Dripping Springs and five hours to get back."

"Why does it take longer to go back up then come down?" Kat asked suspiciously.

"That's just what they say." Toni shrugged.

"*They* say?" Kat asked louder. "Who's they?"

"The brochure, I guess," Toni said a little more defensively. Kat's renewed anxiety made her nauseous. Unable to argue, Kat stood up with Faith and Toni and continued to follow them down the path.

"This is it?" Faith yelled exasperated. "Forget the springs, there's no water!" The eventual end of the trail led into nothing but brush. Dried water lines streaked down the side of a large rock wall, but there was nothing wet. No running water or dripping springs. Perhaps they had somehow lost the right trail, or perhaps it was too hot even for water to drip.

"I don't understand." Toni rubbed her hands together nervously. She glanced around avoiding eye contact with Kat who stared directly at her.

"Where is it?" Kat asked flatly. Toni ignored her.

"Someone's been here." Faith pointed to a pile of rocks. Three rocks were stacked on top of one another in the traditional Girl Scout formation.

"That proves it." Toni nodded her head, and her forehead was crinkled as she thought deeply. "We somehow got off the trail just like the person that left these landmarks." She swiveled around to head back.

"That's it?" Kat asked angrily.

"At least we know," Toni replied.

Kat held her breath and glanced down at her water. It was a little under half gone. So was Toni's, and Faith's was even less. She had followed Toni and Faith into this pit of heat where there was no shade and no water. She held a hand over her heart to make sure

she was still alive, and to her surprise, her heart was strong and active, beating against her chest with the force to break her ribs. It wanted out as bad as she did.

As they headed back, the swift pace kept them agreeable in silence. They reached the spilt on the path much quicker than Kat expected, and when she recognized the wooden sign that pointed the way back, she felt relieved for a brief moment. Then she looked up. There was the vertical wall of canyon so steep it hurt to walk down it. So steep, she had to keep herself from being hurled over the edge by a slight breeze. And as she started up it, her thighs ached. She wiped her forehead and only felt the red, grainy, canyon dust scrape across her skin. There was no sweat. Suddenly, she realized that there hadn't been all day. Her body had refused to give up any water, because it needed it so badly.

Kat thought about her mother. She had no idea that Kat was down in this canyon. With no one around, it might be a couple days before someone found them, if they died. No. That was ridiculous. They were going to be fine, but what if something happened. Kat glanced up, and the blue sky appeared to rest directly on top of the canyon edge that stretched so far out of reach. She kept walking until Faith stumbled in front of her and sat beneath a straggly tree to rest.

"Don't stop," Toni grunted, and she walked right past them.

"I have to," Faith moaned. Kat sat down beside her and noticed that her bottle was already empty. Kat still had a couple of swallows wading in the bottom of her bottle.

"I have to keep going," Toni muttered as she continued on the trail. Kat watched her tracing up the path and called after her,

"Get help." Kat wasn't sure if she meant it or not. She didn't feel as if she was in danger, but her lips formed the words instinctively. After she said it, she felt it. She glanced at Faith who had her head in her hands. The sky loomed over them, tempting them. There was the cow's taunting spirit, as Faith had seen flitting freely above them, and Kat felt like the glassy eyeball staring helplessly up. Her mother's face filled her mind, and she was overwhelmed with the needful feeling to get out of the canyon.

"Come on, Faith. Let's just get to the next tier. We'll take it one at a time." Faith and she trudged up the trail desperately dry. No sweat, no spit, and no tears. When Faith sat down to rest another time, her chest heaved with painful gasps usually accompanied by tears, but none would come. Every time Kat looked for how far away the top remained, her mother's face filled her mind. It became her motivation to keep going, and to encourage Faith along. Faith's breathing was short and strained. She was terribly dehydrated being without water the longest. Toni probably still had a little bit of water left, which Kat wished desperately that she had to give Faith when Faith collapsed onto a rock to rest at the end of another stretch of trail. Kat stroked her arm and felt the same crusty dust scrape off her skin.

"Are we going to die?" Faith choked. Kat's cleared her throat to keep it from squeezing shut.

"I told Toni to get help." Kat comforted her. Faith shook her head.

"I can't believe this," She said with panic filling her voice. "I feel so weak, and the end looks so far away. I think I really need help."

"I know," Kat nodded. "And I'll be right here."

"Is your mouth as dry as mine?" A dread dulled Faith's eyes, and the red specks in the irises appeared to be bleeding into the green sea around them. She smacked her lips. "It tastes like throw up." When Kat heard this, she swallowed the lump in her throat. Faith needed help before she vomited. If she threw up, that meant she needed medical attention for dehydration. Kat knew the symptoms.

"Can you try again?" Kat felt as if they could reach the top if they just went a little further. Faith nodded, so Kat help her to her feet and pressed forward. He step was an effort, and she was conscious of every strained, hot breath that she took. It was mid-afternoon, the worst time of day to be caught in steaming canyon heat without water. Finally, Faith had to stop again. Kat wondered how Toni had been able to continue without any rest, and she hoped that Toni had taken her seriously. Faith wasn't the only one that might need help. Then, Kat heard footsteps, and around a bend, an older man and woman came walking toward them.

"Excuse me!" Kat exclaimed. "My friend and I are having a lot of trouble. Do you have any water to spare?" The man looked at her strangely.

"Pardonnez-moi?" He asked, and Kat's stomach dropped.

"Water," She said, making the motion of drinking. He smiled and pulled out a bottle of crystal liquid that gleamed in the blazing sun. Kat and Faith's eyes widened. He gave it to Faith who took a gulp and made a face. When Kat took a gulp she understood why. It was carbonated, but she had to stop herself from consuming the entire bottle. The man proceeded to babble about something in French while gesturing behind him.

"End," He finally said after a moment of thoughtful silence. The word was more than Kat could have hoped for. She grasped Faith's arm and with a newfound energy, she dragged Faith up the path. After turning a small corner, flat land stretched before them. It was the end of the path, and Kat felt like falling to the ground where she could feel it with her entire body and never let go. But it was Faith who stumbled to her knees.

"Oh my God, Faith." Kat stooped to help her, but Faith's face was pale. She leaned over and heaved dry air since there was not even an ounce of liquid in her stomach to come up. The sobs that followed were dry and tearless.

"I can't even lick my lips," Faith cried and leaned over to all fours. Dying for anything top drink, Kat felt as if she was still trapped on the canyon. Finally off the cliff, she was still stranded with her sick friend panicking by her side, and still there was no one to be seen. Kat stooped beside Faith and rubbed her back. She couldn't think of anything else to do.

Chapter 8

A group of plump, hydrated, sweat-free tourists huddled around a park ranger who bellowed the Grand Canyon's history over the sound of flashing cameras and awe-filled whispers when Toni approached. Her mind was cluttered and numb. She waded through the people ignoring the appalled remarks of those pushed out of the way. The only thought that would emerge in her mind was Kat's plea to "get help." The ranger glanced at her annoyed when she reached him.

"Excuse me," She said.

"Can I help you?" The ranger asked.

Toni opened her mouth, but tears welled in her eyes instead. She had to swallow before she tried to speak again.

"My friends are still in the canyon, and they need help."

"Medical help?"

"Well, I'm not sure about right now, but they might not make it out on their own."

"How far down are they?"

"I guess about an hour away."

"Yes, this happens a lot." The ranger nodded. He glanced at the people standing alarmed behind Toni. "I'll be back in one moment." The ranger signaled. Relief surged through Toni's veins. The ranger would help. He'd know what to do, because he was a professional. So Toni gladly followed the ranger, but when they reached the doors of the guest center, the ranger stopped and pointed inside.

"Go in there and tell the people at the counter that you need three large waters. They'll give them to you, and you can pay them when you get back." The ranger smiled big, then turned back to his group. Toni only stood staring in disbelief.

"What?" She thought angrily. Her heart was pounding furiously against her chest. She didn't want to go back into the canyon. Not after she had worked so hard getting out. Not after she had wondered if she would get out.

The ranger looked like a big, useless lump as he walked away, and Toni felt overcome with guilt. She had walked past Kat and Faith. Kept walking without saying a word. She never even nodded that she would get help. She just walked. Toni knew that if she had stopped she wouldn't have been able to keep going. But she could have said something. Anything.

The people at the counter were as indifferent as the ranger. They gave Toni three big bottles of water without having to pay, but then they turned away to let the fans blow on their faces as they sucked down lemonade and coke. Toni wasn't mad. She was jealous. She wanted to stick her face in the fan's cool air and go to sleep. The air conditioning tingled on her burnt skin, but Kat and Faith were still getting burned. Maybe even sick, and it was all her fault. Kat said she wanted to stop, but Toni wanted to keep going.

The weight of the waters felt like twice her body weight as she lugged them back to the mouth of the trail. She tried to straighten up, but the idea of going back was miserable. She didn't want to go back to face that challenge all over again. She stood still for a moment when she saw the trail. She didn't want to go forward, and she didn't want

to go back. Everywhere she turned, there was something to overcome. The thought of Professor Burke made her grip hard on the bottles.

As she marched toward the trail, the air just above the trail quivered from the heat. At first, Toni thought it was an illusion when she saw Kat and Faith stumbling towards her. They waved their arms at her when they saw her, and she ran holding the bottles in the air.

"Are you alright?" Toni asked. They nodded with the water bottles in their mouths, but there was a strange glare in Kat's eyes. Kat put down her water bottle and patted Faith's back.

"I think she needs to sit down."

Inside the car was silent as they drove away from the Canyon. Toni wanted to say she was sorry, but she couldn't. Faith was soon asleep in the backseat.

"Why didn't you turn around?" Kat asked softly. Toni stared at the road.

"How was I supposed to know that would happen?" She asked defensively.

"It's not about that."

"Then what's it about?"

In her peripheral vision, Toni could see Kat looking at the roof of the car, and she knew Kat was blinking away tears.

"It's about you not listening to me," Kat blurted. Toni's heart skipped. She glanced at Kat and saw the glisten in her eyes.

"I listen to you," Toni said a little weaker.

"No," Kat replied. "You don't."

The conversation ended there as if it never happened. Instead, Kat pulled out the road map, and they looked for Vegas signs.

Chapter 9

She could taste throw up in her mouth. It was only the taste. Nothing could come up. There was no water in her stomach, her pores, or her eyes. Her face felt like the ground she stared at. Dusty, dry, and lifeless. The sun beat down. When she glanced at her skin it started to twist and whither. It turned brown and scaly. Watching with horror, her skin began to melt. She tried to scream, but only a burst of red dust spewed from her mouth.

Faith jerked awake so hard that she hit her head on the cooler beside her.

"Where are we?" She gasped, and she felt as if she had been holding her breath.

"You'll be happy to know, we're an hour away from Vegas," Toni replied with a laugh.

Faith glanced around cautiously. She realized they were out of the Canyon. She was in an air-conditioned car with drinks and food. She opened the cooler and felt her hand around in the ice. When she and Kat were stuck in the Canyon, she would have given anything for one piece of ice.

"Come on, Faith. One level at a time," Kat said, holding Faith's arm. The trail went straight up the Canyon wall and zigzagged up left, then up right. At each turn, Kat sat with Faith for a minute before going up the next one. She hadn't realized that Toni was gone until Kat mentioned it.

"I hope she took me seriously," Kat mumbled. "I really think we need help."

After forty-five minutes of climbing then stopping, climbing then stopping, Faith didn't want to go anymore.

"Let's just wait here," She said breathlessly. "I can't go anymore." Faith hated to cry, but her words were choked with the need to do so. Usually, she held in her tears. Hunter had never seen her cry, and she didn't want him to. She learned not to cry when she saw her parents fight. She learned to hold it in like her mother. Tears did nothing but put ugly streaks on freshly applied blush. There were other means of release. Cigarettes were one way. Faith remembered the night she saw her mother alone on the porch, and she knew. She knew her mother hadn't been alone for long. And she knew her father was out of town.

But now, Faith wanted to cry. She wanted to feel the moisture trickle down her face and drop off her nose. But there wasn't even enough water in her mouth to unstick her teeth from her lips, let alone for tears.

"Excuse me, sir!" She heard Kat yell. A gentle-faced man was walking towards them. It was the first person they had seen since they got off the bus.

"Pardonne-moi?" The man asked. Faith's heart fell into her stomach. He couldn't speak English.

"Water?" Kat tried anyways. She made the motions of drinking. The man nodded.

"Oui." He smiled. He pulled a bottle of water out of his backpack. Kat gave it to Faith first who took a big sip. She almost gagged, yet she couldn't allow herself to give up the moisture. It was carbonated soda water, and suddenly, it was the best thing she had ever had. Kat took a drink too, then pointed behind the man.

"How far?" She tried to motion. A lady approached behind him. She heard Kat's question.

"You are close," She said in delicately practiced English. Faith felt a new surge of energy. They thanked the couple then continued with a new spirit until they rounded the corner and saw flat ground. Faith almost kissed the concrete.

Las Vegas was a bunch of cement poured onto sand and sparkling with dazzling lights. It blinded Faith as she stared happily out the window.

"Caesar's Palace," She whispered with awe as they drove past down Las Vegas Boulevard. Outside were men in skimpy Roman costumes posing for pictures. Faith imagined herself standing with them. When she told Hunter that she wanted to be a dancer in Vegas he laughed. He said she was a dreamer. Secretly, she hoped to show everyone how real her dreams were.

After unpacking and taking showers at the motel, Kat collapsed onto the bed.

"What are you doing?" Faith asked astounded. She had one eye of mascara applied, and she held the wand in mid-air.

"I'm tired," Kat sighed. "You got to sleep in the car."

"Oh, no." Faith shook her head. Toni was in the bathroom.

"What's going on?" She asked.

"Kat wants to wimp out. But I don't think so. This is Vegas! Sin city! Nobody sleeps in Vegas until the next day. Get up!" Faith danced around in her towel trying to liven up Kat, but it was when it accidentally slipped off that Kat burst out laughing. Either way, Faith was glad she was up.

"We need to go to the Stratosphere." Toni's voice echoed off the bathroom walls.

"We will," Faith replied.

"I just want to pull one slot machine," Kat said, pulling on her clothes.

"We will do that, too!" Faith had to steady her hand against the anticipation growing inside her. She couldn't waste her only night in Vegas.

The girls strutted onto Las Vegas Boulevard in the most dramatic outfits they brought. Lots of sparkles and colors, short skirts, and one-shouldered tops. High heels and bangle bracelets. Faith tried to walk a step away every time Kat pulled out her camera and revealed their tourist identities. She didn't need a camera. Her mind was taking snap shots of every glowing sign. She felt her breathing quicken, and she realized the entire feel of the city was just a little faster than normal. The walking, talking, driving, and smoking were all done in a fast "live life while you can" manner. She was drunk off the very air.

"I've never been to France." Toni laughed, so they went into the Paris casino. The jiggling of money and flashing lights made Faith dizzy. The blackjack tables were very quiet and serious, but a craps table was buzzing with hoots of laughter. Faith walked toward it and squeezed in.

"Come on seven!" A forty-year old man was shaking his fist full of dice. When he threw it, the table erupted with yells. Faith's eyes darted back and forth from person to person. So many faces, thin, round, and pointy. They all had the same look of abandoned worries. A tall, broad lady in a drooping red dress turned and bumped right into Faith.

"Sorry, honey." She had a cigarette flopping around in her hand. Faith felt in her purse and realized she'd forgotten hers.

"Damn it," She groaned. She glanced around for Kat and Toni who were trying for a drink at the bar. "There's a cigarette machine around here somewhere." She thought, and she strolled off alone.

The noise of the casino made Faith's heart beat faster. All the men seemed to be dressed alike in sports jackets and slacks. Yet the older men had the accessory of a young girl by their sides, and the younger men clutched their money clips.

"Excuse me." A voice floated over her shoulder. Faith turned to find the same man from the craps table. His wide jaw explained his wide smile.

"Yes?" She asked after he didn't continue.

"I saw you over there, and I was wondering if I could get you a drink?" He didn't take his eyes from hers. Her heart beat faster, and she smiled.

"Sure." She shrugged. Here she was, five minutes in a casino and already her drinks were free.

"Hey Dear," He said to a passing waitress whose cocktail top was slipping out of place. "Two glasses of White Zin." He handed her a red piece of paper that she glanced at then smiled up at him.

"I'll be right back, Mr. Turner."

Faith's eyebrows arched. The waitress knew his name. He must be important.

"How long are you in Vegas for?" Mr. Tuner asked, guiding Faith over to a nearby cocktail lounge with his hand on the small of her back. She shivered with pleasure. He knew how to treat a lady. He wasn't entirely handsome, but there was something about the way he held his head and left one hand resting in his pocket. They sat down at a small table with two cushiony chairs.

"Just tonight." Her hand ran through her hair, and she let it trail down her neck.

"How long have you been here?" He appeared dismayed by her answer.

"Just tonight," She repeated.

"What a shame." He shook his head. "You ought to stay longer. You'll be missing out on a lot if only stay one night – " Then he stopped quickly and grinned. "By the way, my name is Peter Turner."

"I'm Faith," She replied offering her hand delicately as she had seen her mother do so many times.

Her mother did it the first time Faith brought Hunter home. Her mother smiled and whispered into Faith's ear.

"He's handsome." Then she offered her hand. Faith never understood why men appeared so shy when her mother did this, and she thought that the softness of the touch scared them. But Peter Turner took her hand right away. It was slightly moist with sweat.

"I've been at the table all night." He leaned back against his chair. The waitress walked over and gave them their drinks.

"I'm sorry." She smiled awkwardly at Faith. "I need to see some I.D."

"Oh, that's fine." Faith's pulse skipped. She hoped her face did not turn red. The waitress examined her I.D. then set it on the table. Peter Turner retrieved it to look at her picture.

"How old were you here?" He smiled.

"Oh, about 18." She laughed. "It looks like a mug shot."

"No, no." Peter Turner held it up next to her face. "It's perfect."

Before she realized it, Faith had been chatting with Peter for almost an hour. She glanced around for Toni and Kat as Peter Turner was in the middle of explaining how he ended up working in Peru for two years. All Faith found interesting was the beach house.

"I think I need to find my friends," Faith cut him off accidentally. He flinched.

"I didn't know you had friends here."

"Yea. But I don't know where they are."

"Well," Peter Turner's wide smile reappeared. "I have friends here, too. We're all meeting for a party in my suite at twelve. You should bring your friends."

Faith suddenly felt uneasy. She wanted to find Kat and Toni right away.

"Maybe," She replied, still looking around the casino.

"The number is 817." He grabbed her hand, and looked her in the eyes. "I would really like it if you came."

"Maybe." Faith slipped her hand out of his and stood up.

"I hope," Peter Turner said. Faith walked away, and her pace quickened as she got farther from him. Suddenly, all the fast pace and jiggling and flashing and laughing were not so fun anymore. She felt panicked and trapped. Her eyes darted from table to table, slot machine to slot machine, as she scurried along.

"Faith!" Toni called from a blackjack table. "I won thirteen dollars!"

There were Toni and Kat, standing at the table with accomplished grins.

"I'm sorry I've been gone so long," Faith apologized and took a seat next to Kat.

"Oh?" Kat asked. She glanced at her watch. "How long has it been?"

Faith drew back. They didn't notice she had been gone almost an entire hour. She had been worried about them when she realized they were gone and that she was alone.

"I met someone, She blurted. Toni twisted around with interest.

"Oh?" Kat repeated herself.

"Yea. He invited us to a party. I think it would be fun."

"Who exactly is he?" Toni scooted her chips away from the dealer.

"Peter Turner, Faith said.

"And who is he?" Toni asked again.

"He has a beach house in Peru."

A young guy wearing a red jacket with clashing blue pants made eyes at the three girls then leaned into their blackjack table.

"Give me twenty, He said to the dealer, and he handed him a red card like Faith had seen with Peter Turner.

"No problem Mr. Roberts. It's nice to have you." The dealer slipped the red card into a slot then handed the young man his chips.

"Hey, he had one of those, too." Faith pointed to where the card disappeared into the slot.

"Who?" Toni looked very confused.

"Peter Turner, Faith said. The dealer glanced up.

"Peter Turner?" He asked. "He's here all the time."

"Is he important?" Faith asked excitedly.

"He's called the Comp King." The dealer laughed and started sliding cards to the young player.

Faith's mouth was silently open, so Toni and Kat had to drag her away. They led her over to the bar and ordered a round of beers.

"Faith," Toni began. "Do you know what comp cards are?"

Faith shook her head.

"They are cheap cards that people earn to get free stuff at the casino," Kat said. "I saw it on t.v."

"I hate to say it, but this guy is probably a Creep King, too," Toni said delicately. Faith's face burned with embarrassment.

"How do you know that?" Faith asked defensively.

"Faith." Toni just looked at her then turned to sip her beer. Kat did the same. They all sat in silence. Faith thought he was a perfect gentleman. It didn't matter who he was, as long as he showed interest in her. And he did. She decided that he really did like her. He must. He at least wasted a comp card on her.

"I mean, you can get those things by the dozen." Kat laughed.

Faith was boiling with anger that she didn't know what to do with when a voice boomed from behind them.

"I knew I only had to have a little faith." Peter Turner stuck his head between Toni and Faith, leaning his elbows on the bar.

"Um, guys this Peter Turner," Faith said slowly. Toni and Kat shook his hand.

"So what's the verdict?" He asked. "Are you girls gonna party?"

Toni's right eyebrow arched as it always did when she was skeptical.

"I don't think so." Faith smiled. Her hand went straight for her hair, and Peter Turner's face formed that same dismayed look she had seen at first.

"That's too bad," He sighed. "You'd like the suite."

"Maybe some other time." Toni's voice grew stern.

As they walked away and left Peter Turner staring from behind, Faith couldn't help wondering if he was looking at her butt, and she swung it as much as she could.

Chapter 10

Kat just wanted to see was the Pacific Ocean. Toni wanted to go to the Grand Canyon, and Faith wanted to go to Vegas. When they asked Kat where on the Pacific Ocean she wanted to go, she said she didn't care. She just knew that the trip wouldn't be worth it if she hadn't made it all the way. She didn't really decide this until the night before while on top of the Stratosphere in Las Vegas.

The city of Las Vegas looked like a bunch of fallen stars twinkling beneath Kat as she, Toni, and Faith peered out from the top deck of the Stratosphere. The building was one of the tallest in Vegas, and they had tickets to ride the free fall ride on the roof.

"Are you nervous?" Faith asked as she gripped the railing and leaned forward.

"Don't do that," Kat cried. She could just see Faith tumbling off and falling, falling, falling.

"Oh, you are gonna freak when that ride drops you." Faith laughed.

"Pretty much," Toni agreed.

Kat didn't respond. She just wanted to stare at the lights with the firm feel of the railing in front of her, but she could only use one hand. The wind was blowing so strong, she had to use the other hand to grip her hair.

The usher called for the next group, so the girls went through the gate for their turn on the ride. The usher barely looked at them as he helped strap them in, and Kat's heart raced as she pulled on her harness that pulled was supposed to lower over her head.

"Excuse me!" She said as the harness kept bobbing up a bit. "Excuse me!"

The usher glanced over so subtly, Kat almost missed it.

"Yea?" He murmured.

"My harness won't stay down." The panic started to boil in her veins.

"It'll fix itself," The usher said. Then he threw his hand up to tell the operator the ride was ready.

"Are you sure?" Kat yelled. Then she felt the harness click into place, and a current of air deflated out of her.

"Oh my God." The words came out of Faith's mouth in an uneasy way. "Oh my God," She said again. Then the ride shot up. It went straight up into the air as if they were being catapulted into the black abyss above them. Kat could feel all her inner organs bounce inside and hit her lungs since she was confined by the harness. That was a relief.

"Holy Shit!" Toni screamed.

Kat didn't say anything. She stared out onto the city with exhiliration tingling in her skin. Here she was on the tallest thrill ride in the world, staring down at Sin City from almost as high as heaven, and she loved every second. Toni and Faith were screaming their heads off before the ride even dropped for the thrill, and when it did drop, they screamed even harder. All Kat could do was smile. Her smile was so big that it hurt. The wind cut into their faces and whipped their hair around. The ride shot up and down four times like a bouncing ball. Kat gripped the harness and kicked her legs out. She felt so free. She enjoyed roller coasters. Unlike everyone else, this was one place she felt safe. She felt the harness holding her down. She knew she wasn't going anywhere. So she could relax and be thrilled. She felt safer here then on the horse in Texas.

Kat remembered how her mother used to plan trips to amusement parks, and her father groaned in agony. Her mother loved roller coasters, too, but her father hated them. He said they made him sick, like the ocean. As Kat bobbed up and down in the cold,

desert-night air, she realized how much her mother and her were alike. For twenty-one years, Kat always thought of herself as a daddy's girl. Now she wasn't so sure if she had been right all that time. Her eyes scanned over the lit city that her mother had never seen, and she became determined to go to the Pacific Ocean.

"Thank the good Lord, it's over!" Faith hollered out in a Southern Baptist cry. The usher had a strange grin when he unlocked Kat's harness.

"It *did* lock," He said sounding relieved, then he walked away. Kat's heart skipped, and she was unsure if he was kidding or not.

They hurried to the photo booth to see the picture of themselves taken in the middle of the first drop. Kat immediately decided to buy it. In the picture, Faith's eyes were squeezed tight and her mouth was open in the middle of a shriek. Toni's face looked more like a cringe, and one eye was peeking our while the other was closed. Only Kat's face had the bright look of true thrill in it. Her eyes were gleaming wide and her grin stretched across her face. She had never seen herself look so alive.

"What the hell is that?" Faith pointed at Kat.

"Me." Kat muttered curiously. "Why?"

"I just can't believe it." Faith stared at the picture. "You look so happy."

"You *do,*" Toni gasped in disbelief, too.

"Yea, so?" Kat demanded. Toni and Faith both shrugged.

"Well," Faith tried to find her words. "I've never really seen you that happy."

Kat didn't know what to say. She looked at the picture again. Nothing seemed abnormal to her. She thought the picture looked fine. Her hair was standing straight up like a hat since they were freefalling, and her teeth looked really white from the flash.

"I like it," Kat said. She pulled out her money to pay the clerk. Then it occurred to her that she liked the picture. It was a picture of her, and she liked it. Her words from the night of beer and cards at the ranch swarmed her thoughts.

"Do you ever forget what you look like?" Kat wondered if anyone else felt the same way as she when she happened to catch an unexpected glimpse of herself in a window reflection. There she'd be, laughing or eating or thinking, and she looked a lot different than the pictures that always displayed her with a well-prepared picture smile. She never really saw herself in everyday life doing everyday things, and when the opportunity did occur, she usually ended up disappointed. Kat felt the most comfortable on the other side of the camera. She liked creating a picture, not being in it. But in the Stratosphere picture, she didn't see a fake smile that flashed itself on the count of three. In this picture, she thought she saw her soul.

Staring out the window, she saw her reflection in the side mirror. Instead of flinching or turning away, she looked a little harder and grinned.

"What are you doing?" Faith asked. She must have caught Kat smiling at herself.

"Just smiling in the mirror," Kat admitted. Toni laughed in the backseat.

"That's funny, because I thought only Faith loved to look at herself."

Faith jerked her head around with a quick frown of defiance.

"So where are we going?" Faith asked, probably to change the subject.

"Ask Kat, this one's her decision." Toni's voice sounded strained, and Kat wondered if that was the first time Toni had ever given up the power to decide.

"Can't we just drive directly west until we hit sand?" Kat asked. She didn't care where they went, as long as she saw the ocean. She wanted to take pictures and bottle the

sand to bring to her mother. Since her mom had never been to a western beach, Kat decided to bring the western beach to her mom.

"What about a plan?" Toni groaned. "A plan would be nice."

"I saw a sign back there for Newport Beach," Faith suggested.

"Alright, then. Let's go to Newport," Kat agreed.

"Wait, wait. What's in Newport? Why go there? Do you guys know anything about it?" Toni's questions fell jumbled out of her mouth.

"What's to know?" Faith asked. "There's a new port and a beach. Sounds good to me. Toni, for once, just go with the flow instead of trying to be the current."

After hours of driving, the girls rode into Newport Beach as the sun had crested over its peak in the late afternoon. The ocean waves glistened with gold light. As they walked out onto the beach, Kat forgot her camera in the car. Between her toes, she felt the sand filter and then the cold water as she stood on the edge of the ocean that blurred into the horizon. Toni sat down beside her, and then so did Faith. But Kat wanted to stand in the middle of the breeze to peer out onto the water. At first, she held her breath with awe at the vastness that surrounded her. Then the feeling faded.

"What happened?" She spoke out loud.

"I don't know." Toni answered. They all looked at each other then back onto the waves. They had made it to the other side, and to the other ocean. Tired and aching from riding in a car, Kat wanted to go home.

Chapter 11

"How many miles so far?" Faith asked impatiently trying to peer over Toni's shoulder.

"Five thousand, three hundred and six," Toni replied with satisfaction. Faith rolled back into the backseat. She had to stop herself from being angry at Kat for wanting to go all the way to the ocean. She didn't see what the big deal was. They really didn't have time to stay and lay out. Kat could have seen it on t.v. And she was the first one to want to go home. Faith didn't understand it. She would have gladly skipped such a pointless extra two days. But she wasn't ready to go home yet. Hunter was waiting for her. He'd probably bought her something cute, like a teddy bear, or a ladybug picture frame. She collected ladybugs, and Hunter was always springing little ladybug surprises on her. She wondered if he had ever been able to pass up a ladybug if he saw it. Probably not.

Toni pulled the car into the ranch. They decided to stop back by for a night before trying to make it back to Virginia.

"My cell phone is out of range. Can I use the house to call Hunter?" Faith asked. Toni's eyes widened.

"You want to call Hunter?" Toni asked.

"Yea, he is my boyfriend."

"Is he?" Kat joined in. Faith's chest filled with angry air.

"Yes," She barked. "Of course he is."

Granddaddy strolled up to the car to help them with their things. He was so happy to see Toni again. He gave her a big swinging hug.

"You girls look terrible." He laughed. They were pulling themselves from the car and dragging inside.

"We're exhausted, Granddaddy." Toni moaned.

"It looks like it." He smiled. "Come on inside."

A hot dinner waited on the table for them, and Hart filled the glasses with water when they walked in.

"You're alive." He smiled. "That's good."

"Why wouldn't we be?" Kat's voice had a new energy in it that Faith hadn't heard in a week. Faith said a simple hello to Hart, then went to a phone to call Hunter. Hunter's voice was eager as she talked to him. He wanted to know all about her trip, but as she tried to retell it all, she found herself leaving out details that she was just to tired to tell. Perhaps she would never be able to.

In the kitchen, Kat and Toni were trying to do the same for Granddaddy and Hart, but it ended up that Granddaddy and Hart's questions were soon completed with very short answers.

"Who wants to go ride some horses?" Granddaddy's voice boomed as Faith walked back into the kitchen. The girls just looked at him in silence.

"I'm just kidding." He smiled.

Toni decided to take a walk by herself to get away from other people for a while. The ranch looked just the same and yet more beautiful to her. She imagined Gammy galloping across the ranch on her favorite horse. It was the horse that Toni rode when she was first learning since he was so old at that time. Toni's brothers chased her over this

land, around the barn, and in the hay more times than she could count. She was determined to outrun, outride, and outdo them. They'd call her "To-To" to egg her on. They told her she couldn't do it and laughed. They also taught her how to strap a saddle and how to ride bareback. Without them, she may never have wanted to push so hard, even for the smallest of things. They made her believe in herself.

She thought about the Grand Canyon, and how helpless she felt under the sneer of the park ranger. The feeling was familiar, and it was just then that she realized why. Toni decided not to call Professor Burke that night, or any other night. She would focus on law school. It would be nice to go somewhere in Texas. Until the night they played cards, Toni had never really considered living out near the ranch or even on it. Now she knew she had to.

When Kat, Faith, and Toni crawled into the bed that night, they sank happily into the pillows. Kat didn't say anything when Faith reflexively flopped her leg across Kat's. It felt completely natural. Like they were all just one body. The closeness felt more than comfortable but freeing and open. The idea of not being crammed so close together might feel strange when they got home. Before, Kat was used to being an only child, and after her father died, she felt so cornered and alone. Kat never thought that her mother might have felt the same way. She couldn't understand why she had been so eager to go away from what was familiar when she should have been running straight for it.

That morning, just as the sun poked its first ray over the horizon, Kat happily woke up before everyone else.