

Tabbie Ann

She gasps as the wet bowl, the one patterned with forget-me-nots, slides across the frying pan. Her hand jumps for it but she only manages to flip it over the tiled floor. In a sickening crash, blossom petals scatter to the far corners of the kitchen. She stacked the strainer too high.

“Tabitha Ann.” His voice reaches her from the parlor and she frowns, shaken by the sudden loss and dreading the coming reproach. In a few seconds he’s in the doorway, looking down at her as she collects the jagged pieces. “Don’t use your hands, use the broom.”

“I’m sorry Dad. It slid and I tried to save it but— ”

“You were rushing again, weren’t you? You started the dishes late and had to rush because your show starts at eight, right? That show with the silly teenagers?”

Her throat tightens and she rises, keeping her arm back behind her thigh. “I’ll clean it up.”

“What’s wrong with your hand? Let me see.”

She slowly holds her arm out and he takes her wrist, pulling her closer.

“You cut your thumb bad. Come with me into the

bathroom.”

From behind he squeezes the blood out of her thumb, her hand held tight under the tap. Cold water tinted red swirls into the sink and down the drain.

“I can do this,” she says, but offers no resistance.

He towels off her hand and reaches for the medicine chest. As he closes the mirrored door, their eyes meet briefly and he turns away to fumble with the bandage wrapping. He presses the adhesive tabs firmly around her thumb. “There. You go watch your show and I’ll finish up in the kitchen.”

“Thanks Dad.” Slipping out the doorway, she thumps up the carpeted stairs to her bedroom and closes the door.

“Shit.”

She clicks her TV on, but only watches ten minutes before she bounces off the bed and starts pacing the room, tapping her front teeth with her fingernails. She decides to undress. In front of her vanity mirror, she holds a slip of paper against her shoulder, her upper arm, then her shoulder again. She sighs, hides the paper in a book and slips on her nightgown—an oversized tee shirt adorned with the image of a heavy-metal rock star. She can’t dress this way until bedtime—no lounging about the house looking like a bum, he would say. She cocks her head out the door: his TV show is still on but she has to ask

him tonight.

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Carl brooms the shards into a pile and then squats, poking at the remains. The last surviving piece of an ancient setting, Ann always kept it protected in the china cabinet; tonight it held the mashed potatoes. He sweeps the pieces into a dustpan and dumps them in a trashcan hidden under the sink. The cabinet door is loose on its hinges and won't close—he was supposed to fix it last year. He slams it a few times, then grabs another beer out of the frig and returns to the parlor.

He continues watching the true crime show until ominous music indicates something bad is about to happen, then realizes he's seen it before. He downs the rest of his beer, then clicks the remote only to land on commercials. Within the periphery of his dulled senses, he hears flip-flops approaching. Tabbie plops down on the couch beside him; her shoulders stoop and she tucks her hands in between her knees, smiling.

“Hi.”

“Hi sweetheart. What's up?”

“Sorry about the bowl. I always thought it so pretty and wanted to use it tonight.”

“Well—it was an accident. Sometimes you need to pay more attention to what you're doing.”

“Were the mashed potatoes okay this time?”

“Yes they were, matter of fact.”

“Oh good. Dad, I need to ask you something.”

“Go ahead,” he says, dreading this routine.

“Okay, but first can Morgan come over tomorrow and then stay the weekend?”

He kills the TV and turns to face his sixteen-year-old daughter. Her face tilts forward, framed by a wild mane of auburn hair that somehow ends at her shoulders. Her aquamarine eyes are wide open, arching her thick brows into question marks. Her lips part, waiting. The resemblance is striking. He knows this face—from another time, another life—was it a dream? Unlike Tabbie, Ann spoke few words and asked for nothing, but with one warm and guileless look, rendered him senseless.

“Dad?”

“Ah yeah, sure, as long as it’s okay with her parents.”

“Oh thanks, and can we go riding tomorrow, while you’re driving?”

“Only if you wear your helmets and ride easy—no galloping, hear me?”

“Yes Dad.” She sits erect. “Dad, can we ride out to the bluff? We’ll be careful.”

His eyes narrow. “The bluff? That’s over five miles away. No, absolutely not.”

She jerks her head to the side with an exaggerated wink and scowls. Then her face relaxes. “All right.” Rubbing her shirt hem down along her thighs, her eyes begin to dart about the room and he knows she’s saved the best for last. A single bulb from the kitchen illuminates her silhouette—she’s not a little girl anymore and the schoolboys have noticed. They’ve asked for dates—it’s only a matter of time. Every bit as beautiful as her mother, but athletic and headstrong like himself, she is tough to rein in. Maybe he should let her ride to the bluff? But there are wildcat riggers, snakes, rotten cliffs—who knows what might happen out there?

“Uh, Dad—I was wondering, and like, this is real important to me and all—would you mind me getting a little tattoo?”

He jerks his head back. “A tattoo? Like some biker dude?”

“I’d be small, and mostly hidden, here, on my shoulder.”

She pulls her collar down to show him.

“No, you don’t have my permission. That’s a permanent scar and it’s tacky, trashy.”

“But it’s my design and my body and they won’t do it without your permission.”

“No, and your mom would never approve, either. You need to slow down and— ”

“No Dad, you just need to get over it—she’s not here anymore.”

His face drops and he turns away in silence. Pain stabs into his chest and spreads throughout his body and he can’t stop it.

“Oh no, no. I’m sorry Dad. Dad?”

He brushes her hand off his shoulder, gets up and leaves the room.

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Tabbie paces the dirt drive, swinging her arms, impatient. It’s a cool seventy-five at quarter to ten, but it’s going to get hot this afternoon—perhaps, if they are lucky, a thunderstorm will form over the mountains, drift overhead and threaten electrical mayhem. She hears a sputtering engine and races up to the road. A pale, blue speck becomes visible, disappears into a dip of the road and then reemerges as an obnoxiously loud car. At the height of its banging, percussive glory, the Nissan slows and then backfires into the driveway.

“Hey, your car stinks and sounds like shit.”

“Why Miss O’Reilly—that’s a fine how-do-ya-do—bitch.”

Tabbie backs away as Morgan opens her door and climbs out. The girls embrace, laughing. Morgan is seventeen and her best

friend since the fourth grade. “Yeah, there’s yet another hole in my car’s ass.”

“Surely you jest? Hey, I betcha my dad can fix it.”

“Really? I’m going to help, hand him tools or something. Is he still seeing that lush, what’s her name?”

“Oh Candice? No, she didn’t last long—he got tired of her yammering on about the kids—least that’s what he said. Well, you ready to ride, Stinky? Let’s get your stuff in the house and pack the lunches.”

“Lunches? How far we going?”

“A ways.”

The girls chat nonstop as they stuff snacks in plastic bags, fill water bottles and then leave the house. As they approach the barn, Tabbie goes silent, focusing her gaze ahead. Adrenalin—her fuel, her drug of choice—begins to seep into her blood.

“Stay back a bit,” she orders Morgan, “Star is going to be jumpy. I’ve got ’em saddled already.”

Tabbie enters first, using the back door of the stable. Star, the big chestnut gelding, nods his head and starts for her, his shoes clomping in a dance of anticipation. Clutching his halter, she strokes his neck and says, “There, there now. Let me get your bridle on—we’ll go soon. Good boy.” She waves Morgan in, who pets Willie, Star’s laid-back sidekick.

“Hey ’ole pokey, what a sweet boy.” She slips a sugar cube into his soft lips, then swaps out his halter for the bridle and bit.

“Ready?”

Morgan nods and the girls lead the horses out the front door of the stable. Tabbie grabs a five-gallon bucket to mount her horse but he won’t stand still. “Star, what the hell!” she says as he drags her off the bucket. Hanging onto the saddle, she muscles her body up and catches a stirrup with her boot.

Morgan holds Willie’s reins, laughing.

“Come on Morgan, mount up—Star is full of it today.”

At the corral gate, Tabbie uses an iron hook to open the latch and they are free at last. With her friend trailing behind, she eases Star into a lope to blow off steam, turning him right, then left, and now she reins him to a halt, testing her commands. Clicking her tongue and squeezing her knees, she sends him forward again. Following the track that leads to the edge of their property, she feels the first annoying bite of a range fly. At the border, she wheels Star about to face Morgan and he rears up and whinnies. “Hey boy—whoa, whoa.” He spins a tight circle before she can steady him. “He really needs to run,” she yells. “See that bluff out there, to the west?”

Morgan halts Willie, eyeing the horizon as Tabbie points.

“That’s the one I been talking about, bitch. Today’s the

day.”

“Does your dad know about this?”

“No, and he doesn’t have to know—know what I mean?”

“Think we should we put the helmets on?”

“Naw, no need. You’ll be fine with Willie. I’m going on ahead—I’ll wait for you at the next rise.”

A thousand pounds of thrust between her legs, her fuel ready to ignite, she circles Star about Willie and Morgan in a fast lope. Sitting erect, her hips rock with the rhythmic thud of hooves and then her entire body tenses as the bluff wheels into view. Kicking her boot heels in and shouting “he-ya,” horse and rider explode forward in full gallop.

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Carl swings the bob-tailed semi into his long, circular drive. It’s four thirty in the afternoon and he’s starving. He parks the rig behind Morgan’s car, turns the key and the loud, rapping engine dies. He hops out of the cab and then pauses, listening to locusts and the squeak of collar bearings in the windmill, the only sounds heard in the vast silence of the ranch. Something is missing. He stretches, rubs a sore back, and then heads for the barn, mumbling a lonesome song he just heard on the radio.

The stalls are empty; he hurries out to the corral—nothing. He exits the gate and follows the trail toward the boundary,

studying tracks. A dust devil spins far out to the north as his eyes search for her. The twisting mass of the bluff shimmers off to the west, and beyond the Laramies lie as a blue hump. Fear starts to crawl into his chest until he sees two bobbing helmets rise up out of a swale, then two riders and their horses. He waits, scuffing pink trail dust with his boot toe.

“Sorry Dad. We got a late start and time got away from us—dinner’s all ready though—just got to pop it in the oven. I made your favorite casserole.”

“These horses need water and look at Star, he’s as droopy as an old nag.”

“I’m not stupid—I brought them water.”

“Don’t be getting sassy. Get these horses a good drink and get dinner on, okay? I’ll take care of the grooming this time.”

“Yes sir.”

She flicks the reins and passes him, Willie and Morgan close behind. He watches her until she twists around in the saddle, their eyes meet and he turns away.

His boots kick up puffs of smoke as he clears the last swale and reaches the property line. Just beyond the horseshoe tracks continue—now widely spaced craters with subtle gaps where a galloping horse had become airborne. He gazes at the bluff, wavering in the heat, and shakes his head.

Dinner is an hour late. The three of them sit at the kitchen table, recite a prayer of thanks, then dig into the chicken casserole with the biscuits on top, hot from the oven. Morgan is unusually quiet, and Carl catches her sneaking glances at him. He looks at his plate and stirs the steaming concoction.

“I think it’s still too hot,” Tabbie says, and then, after he starts to eat, “Do you like it? Is it okay?”

He doesn’t speak or face her but nods his head and continues to eat. After a moment he finally turns to her, then Morgan. “Did you girls enjoy riding today? It was awfully hot out there.”

Morgan diverts her gaze back to her plate, then glances at Tabbie, who says, “Oh yeah, we did, but I think Morgan got too much sun.”

“You both got some sun—and wind,” he says, staring at Tabbie. “Going to become two wrinkled old ladies.” Morgan giggles and Tabbie rolls her eyes. “Tomorrow is Saturday. What you girls got planned?”

Tabbie’s eyebrows arch upward. “Well um, we were going to drive into town, do some bowling at Dicky’s, then see some friends, and then—Dad, there’s this dance later on, no alcohol or nothing, at the grange, and— ”

“What time does it get done?”

“It goes from eight to midnight.” Her body freezes, watching his face.

He pictures her flirting in the cool, night air—within shadows, between the glare of headlights—and then getting into a car with some guy. “Tabbie, you go have a good time, but you know you have to be home by dark, and that’s nine o’clock. Understood?”

Her head drops. “Yes, sir.” Her eyes dart to Morgan, to her plate, and then they return to her father.

“Is there something else?”

“Um, could I have a little extra money this weekend?”

He doesn’t hesitate to fish forty dollars out of his wallet and hand it to her. “Don’t forget to give Morgan gas money. I’ve got to take the rig tomorrow night and help Bud haul some equipment over to Casper. Won’t be home ’til two in the morning, knowing how things usually go. I’ll trust you’ll behave like a proper young lady while I’m gone.”

“Yes Dad.”

Carl has handed her a shovel and he’s going to watch her dig herself a big hole, watch her squirm and try to lie her way out of it, then he’s going to ground her for a very long time.

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It’s Saturday morning, the lanes are busy and Tabbie soaks in

the noise and commotion like any junkie searching for a cheap fix, for any diversion. The girls weave through a crowd of onlookers to the counter. They purchase their games, swap out their sneakers for shoes and wait for a lane to open.

“Lucky five,” she quips to Morgan after a short wait, and they hustle over to their lane. As soon as Morgan registers them into the scorekeeper, Tabbie bounces her ball hard onto the lane. Her eyes follow its rumbling arc as it sweeps into the exploding pins. “Ya-Hooo,” she yells. A strike. A stocky woman in the party next to them, all wearing blue bowling smocks, gives her a dirty look. Tabbie smiles and waves, then turns to Morgan, “Your up, Stinky.”

Morgan high fives her and moves toward the line. Tabbie watches her pull a spare, then notices two boys eying them. They’re in the lane past the blue ladies, and she flashes a smile and a quick curtsy. The boys laugh. “Oh, we got ourselves an audience,” she says to Morgan.

“You know those guys?”

“No, but watch this.” She steps onto the lane and throws a sloppy ball that rolls in the gutter. Shaking her fists, she rests the back of her hand against her eyes in a gesture of woe. Their own game forgotten, the boys laugh and then cry in mocking pity. Wiggling her behind, she throws the ball hard for another

strike. The boys erupt into cheers, clapping and then she flicks her tongue out at them. She notices the blue woman's blocky face, and she's not at all happy.

“Young lady, if one could call you that, if you don't calm down and behave I'm going to have you removed.”

Tabbie feels the sting of the rebuke and lashes back. “Look here you old cow—this isn't league night, so why bowl with a stick up your ass.” Morgan winces and looks away; the boys are silent. The lady blinks twice, fades back, then turns and heads toward the counter.

“Maybe we should just leave,” Morgan says, “we're going to get thrown out.”

“Naw, go on and take your turn. She doesn't own the place.”

But Dicky arrives and asks them to finish their game another time. Morgan walks away but Tabbie launches into a protest that fails to arouse any empathy from the owner. Defeated, she storms off to the counter, surrenders her ball and shoes and punches through the double doors. In the bright glare of the parking lot she stands shaking, trying to figure out what happened, how the demons or angels—she didn't know which—could strike so quickly and piss all over her parade.

When Morgan joins her, Tabbie cops her tough girl

swagger. “I guess the shit hit the fan this time. Sorry ’bout that.”

“That’s all right. That league bowler just had a bug up her butt. Hey, ya wanna get a softball game going after the practices end?”

“No, but I was hoping you could do me a big favor. Would you mind driving into Cheyenne today—I’ll give you extra gas money? We can have lunch there, my treat.”

“Well, that’s a ways. I suppose so—what ya got planned?”

“I’m supposed to meet a guy there.”

“No—really? Who?”

“You’ll see.”

The Nissan roars from the parking lot in a halo of dust as the girls head for Highway Twenty-five, southbound. Glancing at her shoulder in the visor mirror, Tabbie spots a faded red pickup rolling out of the lot. The dented fender looks familiar, but Morgan suddenly starts mimicking the blue bowler and Tabbie shoves the visor up, laughing.

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As Morgan steers toward the curb, Tabbie spies a man peering out the window of the tattoo parlor. It must be him, and she hopes he’s nice and understanding. They greet him in a small waiting room, its paneled walls plastered with photos of inked

bodies, and Tabbie discovers he's shirtless. Tongue-tied, she gawks at his upper torso—covered with images that strike her as vaguely menacing.

“Where's your dad?” His voice has an edge to it and her eyes dart back to his face.

“He couldn't make it—a last minute thing—he had to drive into Casper. But I got his permission right hear.” She holds out the small slip of paper.

“I can't use that,” he snaps. “I thought you understood—your dad has to be here. Did you actually think you were going to pull a fast one on me?”

Her arm drops along with the bogus note, her legs suddenly weak. “No sir. I, I just thought you could make an exception, ya know, because . . .”

“Is that note really from your dad?”

She shakes her head, staring at the floor.

“All you did was waste my time—I could've been working on somebody else.”

Tears fill her eyes and without another word she turns and heads for the door.

“Look, uh—Tabbie,” the man calls after her, “you come back here when you're eighteen and I'll do a dandy for you, give you a nice discount.”

The Nissan is parked a short ways past his storefront, but she starts walking in the wrong direction.

“Tabbie, the car’s over here.”

“Oh.” She turns, squinting in the sunlight; a passing truck startles her. She tries to speak, tries to shake it off, but stands paralyzed. She’s failed to get her Pegasus, a winged horse leaping out of a broken heart—her badge of survival, and eighteen will be too late—she wanted him to see it and know *this is me*.

Morgan walks over and takes her hands. “Hey, it’s okay—it’s not the end of the world. Something’s got you by the tail today. Come on, I’ll drive us home—we can talk in the car.” Morgan leads her to the passenger door and opens it for her. She gets into her driver’s seat, pulls away from the curb and backtracks to the highway.

“You wanna tell me what’s going on?” she asks, and then, speaking louder over the exhaust, “Is this about your dad?”

Tabbie stares ahead—rigid, biting her lower lip—bracing herself against something that feel’s like it’s ready to explode.

“I’m worried about you, Tabbie. You know I love you. You talk to me when you’re ready, I’ll be here.”

Tears burn her eyes and she tastes the metallic bitterness of her own blood. She doesn’t deserve such a beautiful friend—

she can't even be honest because she's a fraud, a poser who can no longer hide the deadness inside. Her mother's death was the first blow, then she lost her father—his laughter, his smile—she used to be his princess. She turns to check on the truck that's been shadowing them. It belongs to Bud but it's her dad inside, waiting to nail her good. Sliding a pint liquor bottle—one of his—from her purse, she waves it out the window and drops it onto the asphalt, watching it bounce and spin back down the highway. Then in one, swift move, she unbuckles herself, pops the door handle up and pushes out.

“Tabbie,” Morgan screams. She lunges for her and manages to grab the collar of her tee shirt before it rips all the way down—but she doesn't let go and her fingers catch the waistband of her shorts. She steers, brakes and hangs onto her friend as the Nissan comes to a skidding halt on the shoulder of the highway. A dust plume smelling like burnt rubber drifts over as the pickup swings in behind.

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“Get out of this car right now, young lady—you're in big trouble.” Carl reaches in and tries to grab her but she swats him with one hand while the other clasps her shirt.

“She needs help,” Morgan yells, “she tried to jump.”

But he doesn't hear—she needs to be taught a lesson.

Tabbie latches onto the seat back but with a sharp jerk he pulls her out. She tears away and falls, sobbing, onto her knees, still holding her shirt. Morgan continues to shout from the driver's seat but he has to be firm.

“Get up or I'll drag you to the truck.” She gasps as he yanks her up by the arms, and now he sees them—above and below her bra and on her belly as he pushes the cloth aside—dozens of cut marks, some scared over, some fresh and red, some bandaged. A semi blows by and he turns to shield her from the blast of grit, the prying eyes. He stands for a moment in disbelief, his wall of anger demolished. Searching her eyes, he sees only despair.

“Tabbie, what happened?”

“You don't love me anymore,” she wails, “you forgot about me.”

He feels a finger poke into his side—it's Morgan, her face also covered in tears. “You best hold her, Mister O'Reilly.”

Carl pulls her close and hugs her—like he used to do in that other time when they were all together, riding horses and laughing. Her warmth envelops him as he kisses her head, and then he says close to her ear, “I'm so sorry Tabbie, it's been hard.” Stroking her hair, she stops shaking and then he tells her, “Look, you go to that dance, just call me at midnight okay,

because I still worry and you're all I got." She nods against his chest, and then he feels her arms tighten and squeeze into his back.