

# THE SIX GIFTS

PART I: SECRETS



CHRISTIE K. KELLY



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The Six Gifts Part I: Secrets

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For my dad





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THE SIX GIFTS: SECRETS

*Our poisons come in every guise  
Their subterfuge to blind our eyes  
And steal from us the little joys  
That life bequeaths and time alloys*



## CHAPTER ONE

1964



Olivia is slapped into consciousness—or more like punched—and comes to with her small, mystified face inches from the concrete, water erupting from her mouth in little spurts, like a fountain misfiring.

She senses no pain at all, just an overwhelming desire—an almost frantic need—to return to where she'd been just a moment before. She rolls her head toward the pool, her eyes darting from side to side, searching for the comforting blanket of light that, a second ago, had so lovingly enveloped her. The sun glints a harsh yellow off the pool's surface, not the same mystical white light she'd just been surrounded by.

A cacophony of voices rises and falls around her. Her tiny



body is lifted from the ground and positioned in a lounge chair. Many hands move over her, each frantic touch feeling like an interruption, an erasure of sorts, slowly washing away the sensation still fresh on her skin, the ecstatic feeling that she'd been drizzled with warm honey from head to toe. White honey, though, a kind so pure that it isn't really honey at all, but something else entirely.

Later, Olivia cannot sleep. She can't eat or drink or think of anything but the ecstasy of the white light. She holds vigil for it under her bed covers, behind her eyelids, inside her brain, just under her skin. She simply cannot let it go, can't allow herself to have lost it. She attempts with all her might to retrieve it. But, like a wisp of smoke through a window screen, it had slipped away.

The very next day, Olivia follows her older sisters to the next-door neighbors' pool; the only backyard pool in the entire town. With a soldierly determination, she marches in slow motion, as one does in water, down the pool steps and across its floor, seeking yet again, without hesitation, that which had swaddled her the day before.

This time, Olivia's sister spots her first, her hair floating in a sinuous, slow-moving eddy around her still, composed body. There is commotion, voices, more pounding on the back, another fountain of tiny spurts. But Olivia hangs on to the white light a little longer. And, this time, it is even whiter, warmer and sweeter, almost like the feeling of submerging into a steaming bath, or when, on an exceedingly hot day, a cool breeze seems to lift your body ever so fleetingly from terra firma. It is all of this and more. It is unexplainable, and then it is, again, gone.

Three-year-old Olivia is no longer allowed near water until

she has proper swimming lessons. But she knows now that she can wait. She has all the time in the world. She is blessed, and she knows it. There is a reason the white light has teetered her on its knee, revealing itself as an astonishing comfort, an eternal grandmother in waiting. With this recognition, she basks in an indescribable peace, and yet, at the same time, she is filled with a sudden sense of urgency and understanding. *She was saved and remains here for a reason.*

It is a paradox. She aches for the white light. But the wanting to know *Why* eclipses the ache. It eclipses it day and night, year after year, and manifests as a driving force within her.

## CHAPTER TWO

### PRESENT DAY

**T**here isn't a kayak, boat or person in sight of Olivia and her husband, Marco, as they leisurely sweep their paddles across the rippled surface of the mountain lake near their home in Vermont. It's a cool Tuesday, weeks before school lets out when the lake will be teeming with locals and vacationers. On every side of the water, mountains project skyward, blanketed with yellow-green foliage carrying the illusion that if one could reach out and touch those mountains, they would feel as soft as chenille.

In the lead, broodingly handsome Marco steers his kayak past the rocky jut-out that marks the point where the lake expands east, revealing the cleared slopes of a local ski resort. He pushes further and further into the open water while Olivia



struggles to keep up. Her breathing is labored, and the effort agitates her. Although kayaking has always been one of her favorite activities, lately she finds the experience to be lackluster and remote, like most everything else about her life these days.

As she paddles, a reel of the last few years runs over and over in her head. She and Marco had moved to Vermont two years earlier to escape the toxic air of New Jersey, after having been poisoned by methane gas and hydrogen sulfide that leaked from a crack in the sewer pipe in their home. People couldn't understand how they didn't recognize there was a leak—sewer gases smell like rotten eggs. But there had been an earlier oil leak from the tank in their basement, and it had taken a small squad of technicians many days to correct the problem and clean up the mess. The smell of oil had permeated every floor of their house, masking the noxious odor of gas. Over the months following the oil leak, Olivia had gotten sicker, weaker and thinner every day. Paramedics had to be called twice because she had collapsed or passed out. But no one could figure out what was going on. The doctors fed her antibiotic after antibiotic until she was eventually told to see an allergist, and it was the allergist who diagnosed her symptoms as toxicity. In the following week, Marco finally admitted that he had similar symptoms and they made the hard decision to evacuate their home. A mold specialist was called in, but he didn't find mold; he smelled the rotten eggs coming through the washing machine vent on the second floor—the floor where no one ever went except Olivia and Marco.

They moved from motel to motel, while Olivia tried to cope with newly heightened sensitivities. She was suddenly unable to withstand, among other odors, the off-gassing of carpets and fabrics and new paint. They finally ended up in a motel on the

ocean, in January, where they slept with their coats on in a room with the sliders open, as freezing rain and snow blew in. It was the only way Olivia could breathe and sleep without going into seizure. The days after the evacuation of their home were spent searching for a doctor who could help them. Most looked at them like they were crazy when they told their story. But, finally, they found a holistic doctor who put them in hyperbaric oxygen tanks. The first time Olivia climbed out of the tank, the entire doctor's office smelled embarrassingly of rotten eggs.

Week after week, Olivia lay in the hyperbaric tank, and then the motel bed, and later in a little rental house on the water where she waged war against the poison that circulated, hidden, in her veins. She and Marco never did move back into the house that had poisoned them. Instead, they had the gas leak fixed, sold the house and eventually fled to Vermont, where the air isn't saturated with fertilizers and pesticides—and where Olivia's rail-thin body hopefully could survive the summers without her falling into a seizure every few days.

As Olivia paddles, she ponders the idea that she and Marco, in their 50s, have become prisoners of these green mountains, and the notion grates on her like sandpaper on a wound. The vastness of the land and mountains that surround her no longer seems like a welcome reprieve. It doesn't feel like her horizons are expanding; more like they're shrinking, as if she's been plopped into a bubble. She misses their friends and the busy activity of their forklift business, Alfieri Inc., now run by their younger son, Rio. She misses working and being a part of something bigger than herself. But most of all, she misses her kids and grandkids.

The eerie yodel of a loon's mating call breaks the peaceful

silence outside Olivia's head. But inside, she feels anything but at peace.

"Stop, will you!" she calls to Marco. "This is far enough!"

Marco plunges an oar into the water to break his momentum and then maneuvers his kayak around to face his wife. "You want to stop and float here?" he asks.

She doesn't want to float anywhere. She wants to fly like the loon she just saw take off across the lake. "Yes," she replies, as she attempts to catch her breath. Their boats face each other, Olivia's pointed west and Marco's east. Behind her sunglasses, she stares at the lines etched into her husband's eternally tanned face, and at his now salt-and-pepper waves of hair that used to be springy black curls. His looks haven't faded, though. He is still as handsome as ever. Although, as she notices, his face seems to have a blankness now, an expression void of even an inkling of passion. Instead, he has the appearance of someone who's keeping up a constant vigil against some amorphous fear.

"I can't stand it!" The words erupt from Olivia's mouth without warning.

"Can't stand what? I thought you wanted to come out here!" Marco replies.

"This isn't living," Olivia says. "We might as well be dead!"

Marco's head snaps back toward hers in shock. "Olivia! Don't say that!"

"Why not? We act like we're dead already!" She shoves an oar forcefully into the side of Marco's kayak. "I keep telling you that I don't want to live the rest of my life this way, you know, up here in the middle of nowhere," she says as she gestures with her elbows to the right and left. "But you won't listen!"

Marco's shoulders sink. "I don't know what you expect from

me, Olivia. We've gone over it a thousand times. You can't live in New Jersey because of the air and you don't want to live here. What the hell *do* you want?"

"Anything but this! I've got to do something, Marco! I can't just sit around and watch the time go by. You might be able to just sit there in your La-Z-Boy and watch life happen on the TV. But I can't. I want to live it!"

"Oh, so I'm the problem?" Marco sits up straight and twists the cap back onto the plastic bottle of water he's just taken a swig of.

"Well, you're the one that keeps me here like a prisoner!"

"Prisoner? Fuck you!"

Even in the glare of the sun, Olivia can see that the complexion on Marco's face has turned from olive to bright red. "Fuck you!" she hurls back.

Marco flings his half-empty water bottle at Olivia, grabs his oars and paddles past her. Olivia's natural reaction is to lurch her body away from the projectile. When she does, her center of gravity is thrown off-kilter, causing her kayak to tip to one side. She attempts to re-right the boat, to regain her balance, but it's too late. She slips into the water like a fish being thrown back. The icy-cold Vermont lake shocks her senses and stiffens her limbs. Having been a strong swimmer throughout her lifetime, she had foolishly chosen not to wear her life jacket. But her strength isn't what it used to be; she struggles to move her arms and legs against the weight of her wet clothes and shoes in the dark water that is pulling her downward. Her panicked open eyes see only black, but in her mind's eye she senses a hauntingly familiar bright white. The specter wrenches her from immobility and triggers her arms to scoop through the heavy water and her

legs to frantically pump her back to the surface. She grabs onto her overturned kayak, pulls herself up and drapes herself over it, all before Marco has been able to turn and make his way back to her.

“Olivia!” he screams. “Olivia! Are you okay?”

The thought that she is dead-tired crosses her exhausted mind—dead-tired. She’d just got done saying that she might as well be dead. It appears the universe was listening. Scraping back the wet hair from her face, she treads water and lifts herself a couple of inches to peer at Marco. “Thanks,” is all she says.

“I didn’t mean to do that!” Marco says in a panic. “I didn’t mean to knock you out of your boat! Olivia, I’m so sorry!” He maneuvers his kayak next to hers.

“I’m sure you are,” she whispers sarcastically. But her voice is inaudible to Marco’s hard-of-hearing ears.

“Do you think you can pull yourself into my boat?” he asks.

“Give me a minute,” she replies through chattering teeth. Her eyes are now fixed on the soft mountains in the distance. She wishes the warm blanket of yellow-green could wrap itself around her and halt the bitter chill that has taken up residence in her bones.

Marco calculates while he talks. “I think if I shift all my weight to one side, you’ll be able to pull yourself into my boat. If not, I’ll get you in and I’ll swim to shore.”

Olivia knows there is no way Marco can swim in this cold water all the way to shore. To begin with, he’s not a strong swimmer. She clenches her teeth and pushes off the overturned kayak, slipping herself back into the water. She feels the cold permeating her body, sending the sensation of little razors sliding up and down her skin.

Marco's boat is her salvation. She focuses on the red fiberglass in front of her, willing herself the strength to hold on. The kayak teeters as Marco adjusts his weight against hers. "Grab onto the paddle!" he instructs her. Somehow, she's able to grip the plastic oar while Marco pulls with all his might until she is draped across his boat. It takes a few minutes of rest before she's able to maneuver herself fully into his kayak.

Olivia shivers as she leans back against him, while Marco awkwardly paddles them toward the boat ramp. She sinks into her husband's warm body, but the gyrating motion of his paddling chafes against her wet clothes until she feels the friction scrape the skin raw on her upper arms. She grits her teeth against the rhythmic pain and focuses her attention on the distant shoreline. As Marco paddles, Olivia watches another loon fly across the surface of the lake. Her mind ping-pongs from thoughts of the deep, unforgiving lake to the beautiful creature that soars in front of her. She feels trapped in helplessness, and jealous of the loon.



## CHAPTER THREE

### PRESENT DAY

**A**n hour later, Olivia wraps her chilled hands around a cup of hot tea while she waits for Marco, who has gone off to find someone with a boat to help rescue her overturned kayak. She has changed into warm clothes and stares at her cell phone as a distraction from the angst in her gut. She feels like she's swallowed a rock. Olivia's brain knows that falling out of the kayak wasn't Marco's fault, but logic doesn't seem to be in play in the pit of her stomach. Instead, the emotion of the event wraps around the rock in her belly like a layer of sediment.

Facebook presents her with a friend request. She stares at the name on the screen, Brenda Garrison. There have been others from her past who've tried to find Olivia—tried to entice

her to hit the “friend” button. But Olivia hasn’t taken the bait. Instead, she chooses to hang somewhere on the fringes of that social media program.

This name looks friendly, though; warmly familiar even. And in its familiarity, it demands more than a mere, dismissive “click” to hurry past, or a careless slam-down on the memories these requests tend to drag to the surface. After all, the name should look familiar. Brenda Garrison had been Olivia’s best friend for 10 years, the girl with the long blonde hair, the big brown eyes and the even bigger boobs to match. The one who’d gotten all the boys in high school.

Olivia’s curiosity rears up with a childlike insistence. She wonders if Brenda settled for one of those high school boy-friends, or if she ended up marrying some “bigwig” from the city. And she ponders whether Brenda had ever become a fashion designer like she’d dreamed of in those younger years.

Olivia lifts her head of dark-brown hair toward a corner of the vaulted ceiling, where a slender ray of sun is piercing through the high windows, illuminating a freshly spun spider’s web. A fly, suspended in the sticky web, hangs entombed. A chill of recognition courses through Olivia, as if her skinny, ransacked, poisoned body shares a fate with the fly. Fucking fly, she thinks. Fucking poison. Fucking tomb.

Her eyes drift back to the screen and—on impulse and without the normal checks that keep her steady—she sets her cup of tea on the counter, clicks the “friend” button and maneuvers to the page.

Wow, her childhood best friend is still beautiful, still has that “come-hither” smile. A wave of nostalgia surges up in Olivia and she finds herself with an unfamiliar longing, a desire to

know more. A Facebook comment pops up and she reads the post: "I was hoping it was really you I'd found."

"It's me. How are you?" Olivia types automatically, while her mind is still focused on how quickly her old schoolmate responded. She considers that the friendly and gregarious Brenda has become one of those people addicted to social media.

"I'm good. Would you mind if we took this to instant messaging?" Brenda asks.

"Okay." Suspicion begins to worm its way into Olivia's judgment. The familiar impulse to retreat and slam the door creeps along her still chilled skin.

"There. Better." Brenda continues. "How are you? You fell off the planet girl."

"Not really. Life just got busy." Olivia squeezes one of her hands into a fist. Steady girl, she tells herself; you can cut this off quick if you need to.

"Do you still live back east?" Brenda posts.

Olivia's slender, arthritic fingers open back up onto the keys. "Yes. I'm married with two sons. How about you, any kids?"

"Oh yeah, one boy, two girls—all out of the house. I'm a single mother now, thrice divorced."

"What? I always thought that when some lucky guy landed you, he'd never let go." Olivia's interest is piqued.

"Yeah well, I guess they all got their love for my boobs confused with their love for me, lol."

"Lol ...." Olivia catches herself responding with the popular Facebook acronym. Where did that come from? It's not her style. "Just wondering," she continues, "was Bobby one of your husbands?"

"HELL NO!" Brenda interjects in all caps. "I dropped him

sophomore year in college and went onto bigger and better, if you know what I mean. Or so I thought, anyway, lol. Have you stayed in touch with anyone from back home?"

"No. I never seemed to have the time. You?" Olivia's brain begins a tug of war with her heart. Her brain says to end the conversation, but her heart isn't ready.

"Well yes. I'm still in touch with a few people. Tommy Johnson just e-mailed me this morning. He wanted me to know that Jeff was killed in a car accident yesterday. I thought you might want to know. Tragic, huh?"

Olivia reacts with a visceral jolt that spreads like electricity throughout her body, turning into an ache that pulsates just below the surface. A tear drops onto the keys of the laptop. She's surprised at her own reaction. After all, she hasn't seen this guy in over thirty years. He may have been her first love, but that was decades ago. Gathering herself, she types another question. "Was it sudden or do you know if he suffered?"

"I don't think so. Tommy said he was killed instantly. I guess his truck flipped and burned. He has two children. He married late. Dana Freeman. Remember her?"

Olivia scours her memory to put a face with the name, but nothing materializes. Instead, a visual of Jeff's kids and his wife, a neat little family of four, pops into her brain. How devastated they must be. "No, I don't think so. Was she in school with us?"

"She was a few years behind us, three maybe four. You knew her older sister Carrie. She was in our class."

The image of a mousy, quiet girl with her nose in her books eventually comes to Olivia's mind. "I think I remember her, quiet and shy. She sat in the back of Mr. Vreeland's class, right?"

"Yeah, that's her. Dana's a younger version. Jeff should never

have married her. He should have held onto you.”

Olivia shuts her eyes tight. Images of Jeff swell up; he was half Mexican on his father’s side and half Irish on his mother’s. Olivia remembers her attraction to his black hair and deep brown eyes. He was of medium height and had a muscular build—muscles gained from hard work on his father’s ranch. The ranch where she’d first witnessed the miracle of a cow giving birth to its calf. And then Jeff’s father saving it from sure suffocation after the mother rejected it when the birthing sac didn’t break open and got stuck over its head. The same ranch where Olivia had learned to stabilize her stance, tuck her elbows into her sides, exhale, and, firmly, without hesitation, squeeze the trigger of a pistol.

She feels something well up in her throat, the vile taste of acid. Swallowing hard, she pushes it back down. “Where do you live now, and will you be going to the funeral?” But changing the subject only masks the churning in her gut. Memories have grit. They hang on, pushing with ferocity toward some reckoning.

“I live in Denver and I’m going to try,” Brenda responds. “Tommy said it probably won’t be until Monday. I don’t know if I can get off work, though.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m a loan officer at a bank. Do you think you might go? To the funeral, I mean?”

“Oh, I don’t think so. It’s been over thirty years. I don’t know anybody there anymore, and it’s a long trip. I don’t fly.” A murmurous hum begins to vibrate under her skin. Olivia inhales deeply in attempt to squelch it.

“Well, if you reconsider, let me know. I’ve got to run. The boss just walked in ... Oli, it’s been great reconnecting.”

“Yes, it has. I’ll be sure to stay in touch now. Thanks for letting me know about Jeff.”

The picture snaps into her brain like the trailer of a movie. *Olivia and her friends sitting on the bank of the Rio Grande where they always gathered to party. They had arranged rocks in a circle to build a campfire where they burned dried brush and driftwood, drank beer and deliberated what the future would bring. Brenda was there, blonde curls bouncing as she danced like a gypsy around her sexy but obnoxious boyfriend, Bobby. Jeff was sitting next to Olivia, his arm around her, beer in hand. The conversation is still crystal-clear. They were all talking about her. “So, Oli claims she’s going to be a millionaire by the time she’s thirty. What do you think Jeff, marriage material?” Bobby chided.*

*Jeff just laughed and lifted his beer. Everyone else raised theirs in unison. “To healthy, wealthy marriage material,” Bobby toasted, as he stuck his free hand under one of Brenda’s breasts and gave it a heave. Everyone laughed, and Jeff bent down to kiss Olivia. She remembers the warmth of his breath and the tickle of his hair as the lock that forever hung over his eyes brushed over hers.*

Jeff knew then—knew well—that he couldn’t hold onto her, that there wasn’t a chance in hell. He wasn’t meant to leave that town and there was no way she was going to stay.

*A million dollars, Olivia thinks, recalling Bobby’s jibing. She’s made her million, but it’s all on paper, tied up in their business. Even if they were to sell the business, a million dollars wouldn’t support them for the rest of their lives—if they’re lucky enough to live another ten or twenty years. Hell, just the doctor visits, medications and chemical-free food they both need to survive would eat it up in no time. A million bucks isn’t what it used to be. She tells herself she should’ve dreamed of being a billionaire.*



Olivia's thoughts turn to Brenda, as she tries to conjure up images of what she imagines her life has been like. But, instead, a surge of old memories takes over: Brenda in her hot pink bikini, long blonde curls cascading over those formidable breasts, breasts that Olivia was so jealous of back then. Brenda never seemed to notice the jealousy, or, for that matter, even the stares from the other girls, or the boys' ogles. She was just an innocent, fun-loving girl with a heart of gold. A twinge of sorrow pinches Olivia's heart to think that she's missed out on years of making new memories with her old best friend.

Long-dormant images of her small, southwestern hometown, Alamosa, surface: smells of the dusty riverbank where she relentlessly walked, the warmth of bonfires in the town park on frigid winter nights, the regal peak of Mount Blanca standing like a sentinel on watch, and the steady flicker of the golden-yellow aspen leaves that dot its ridges throughout the fall. Olivia wonders anew about the unstoppable, slow-motion progress through time, time in which she and her friends morphed ever so gradually from tiny curious beings into gutsy young adults.

After all those visions of grandeur she'd had as a teenager, how she ended up here in such a mundane existence on the side of a mountain in Vermont is the grand question now. Oh, she still has her ideas, but they're different at this point. She recalls one in which she and Marco conspire to rob a bank and drive across the country like Bonnie & Clyde, except, in Olivia's version, they throw money out the window to poor people while they're being chased. And then there's the idea that she'd grow weed in the basement like Nancy on the TV show *Weeds*, but they give it all away to sick people who need it for medical purposes. She'd tried to get Marco to buy into that one, but he'd

just looked at her like she'd been smoking too much of the very stuff she was proposing to grow. And then there was the most diabolical scheme of all. She keeps this one quiet, not wanting Marco to think she's gone mad. In this plot, Olivia gets a job in the executive dining room at the chemical company, Monsanto. With all that corporate money, they've got to have an executive dining room. Olivia secretly injects measured but lethal doses of their own pesticides into those cretins' gourmet lunches and watches them get sicker every day until they die excruciatingly painful deaths, just like the bees, the birds and the human population that the company is so cavalierly extinguishing.

But reality always rears up and slaps Olivia in the face. She realizes that she'd probably die of a heart attack while she was in the act of robbing a bank. And, Marco's right, she'd no doubt smoke all the pot and her heart would stop from too much THC, especially considering that after being chemically injured she's now intolerant of chemicals. The executive dining room job is a far stretch, too. She doesn't have the stamina to hold down a job long enough to enact the scheme. But, without a doubt, she's got to do something. She is in her 50s and in poor health. She knows for certain that she has yet to find the answer to what she's referred to nearly her entire life as *The Why*. And the likelihood of finding it is slipping through her fingers.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PRESENT DAY

**T**he dirt coats Olivia's feet as she scuffs along the top of the riverbank, digging her toes into the loamy soil and kicking clumps of it into the air with each deliberate step. Her deep connection to the earth melts the world away and draws her into the warmth of its womb. Her fingers graze each tree within their reach, and she pauses occasionally to stroke a leaf or to admire the delicate intricacy of a spider's web.

The sun is warm on her tanned skin and her senses are tuned to the sounds of birds flitting from tree to tree, the rustle of the breeze through the leaves and the rushing sounds of the river. She stops and closes her eyes, listening intently to the water. It teases the corners of her mouth, causing them to turn up, and she sighs in contentment. She opens her eyes and continues along her path, faster now, anxious for the release the water so willingly provides.

*She stops short when she sees a young man, a teenager maybe, sitting on a rock that juts out from the top of the riverbank. He's faced away from her, looking downstream, his knees pulled up to his chest, arms wrapped tightly around them. He is still, like a statue, the only movement about him that of some wisps of his dark hair in the warm breeze. He's wearing jeans, and his t-shirt is stuck to his back with sweat. Olivia peers downstream to try and see what he's looking at. There is just the river though, proud and roaring as it moves along its course.*

*She steps a few yards closer to him and sees a flash of movement out of the corner of her eye. Shifting her gaze down the bank and toward the river again, she notices a young girl with auburn hair standing on the shoreline waving her arms as if to beckon someone in the distance. The girl's heavy, long-sleeved dress hangs too fully on her thin little frame. It is impossible to see whom the girl is trying to summon. Olivia takes another step, moving past a stand of prickly bushes just below the ridge of the bank. In doing so, she can now see a woman a good distance beyond the young girl. The woman is kneeling in a shallow pool of water where the current has redirected itself around a sandbar, building a fragile, temporary dam that will wash away with the next storm. The woman's sundress billows in the water around her hips like an opened canopy. Her head is bowed, hands covering her face and her shoulders are shaking as if she is crying.*

*Olivia's first instinct is to go to the woman, but she looks again at the teenage boy and realizes he can clearly see the woman too. Yet he seems to be ignoring her. Olivia intuits that the young girl and teenage boy are the woman's children. But, if that's so, why isn't the boy responding to his sister's obvious gestures for help? The girl moves further downstream, still trying to flag someone's attention. The teen-*

*ager, however, does not move.*

*Not wanting to pass them—nor desiring to turn back—Olivia digs her toes into the dirt and squats down. Her eyes settle on the woman, who is clearly in distress. Going to her would be an intrusion, Olivia reasons. Then, suddenly, the woman slips down into the water. Olivia's heart leaps into her throat, and she jumps up. The woman sinks further into the water, almost as though she were in quicksand. The teenaged boy stands and climbs the few steps to the top of the bank, and he walks south, past the woman and the girl, his pace quickening with each step.*

*When Olivia sees the young girl running toward the woman, Olivia stands up and starts to pick her way down the bank. The girl screams for help. Heat prickles Olivia's neck and sweat begins to pour from her skin. She becomes tangled in the brush and struggles to get down the bank. The thorny bushes dig into her arms and legs, and the more she tries to free herself, the tighter the bushes hold her. She feels herself suffocating, her neck now choked in a tangle of brambles. Olivia can hear the girl's desperate screams and the woman's anguished choking, but she can't see anyone anymore. She panics—unable to breathe, move, speak.*



Olivia awakens with a start, gasping for air, drenched in sweat. It's the third time in as many weeks that such a dream—with all its urgency, its haunting characters, its sense of physicality—has invaded the recesses of her subconscious.

But this morning the dream has a mote of clarity, a revealing flicker of understanding. The river must be the Rio Grande. It must have something to do with Jeff's death. Always intuitive,

Olivia must have picked up a signal. It most certainly wouldn't be the first time.

Still lying in bed, the idea suddenly lands in her brain like a jet airplane touching down. She's got to go to Jeff's funeral. She wants to go. She ponders the idea for a minute. Fear creeps up. She pushes back the thoughts that she isn't well enough and that going back to Alamosa maybe isn't such a good idea. She convinces herself that there's nothing to be afraid of. The past is the past and the present is slipping away. Quick as a flash, the plane comes to an abrupt halt and the decision is made. In the same way she's made all her decisions, from the gut. It's only in the past few horrid years that she's foolishly varied from that practice. She is going and that's that. These essences of childhood that have been invading her subconscious have taken hold and are spilling into the dark chasm Olivia has kept closed-off and secure for all these many years.

She gets out of bed to let their two curly goldendoodles outside. Tucker, the protector, is the color of caramel and poodle-smart. Casper-white Boo, wily and goofy, is retriever through and through. They do their duty and then charge back inside, wrangling for position by the cabinet where their treats are stored, and sit obediently waiting for Olivia to dole out their score. She finishes with the dogs and finds herself lingering by her collection of carved wooden bears. They must have nearly thirty of the things, given as gifts to Marco and her over the years, primarily from their kids. Olivia pushes on the little wooden arm of the rocking chair bear and it begins to rock back and forth. Then she runs her fingers across the top of the whitewater rafting bears and up the tree of another, where a cub hangs for safety. She has looked at these bears a thousand times



always wondering what it was that made her start the collection to begin with. She realizes she is using the bears as a stall tactic. So, she takes a deep breath and turns to Marco, who is sitting in his La-Z-Boy watching the morning news, the volume so low that there's no way he can actually make out what they're saying. It's something he does when he gets up before her so that he doesn't wake her. "Marco, something's happened." Olivia's voice is solemn yet strong. The murmurous pulsing of her blood is almost deafening now, but discernible only to Olivia.

Marco abruptly turns to face her. "What? What's the matter?"

"Well ... I had a Facebook conversation with an old friend from high school yesterday while you were recovering my kayak. She contacted me to tell me that my high school boyfriend was killed in a car accident." The words, now emerging from her own mouth, hit Olivia hard. Hearing them spoken out loud seems to make the circumstances more real. Her eyes widen, and she begins to tremble. Looking down at her hands, she notices that they are visibly shaking.

"Oh." Marco's face softens, the tragedy having too many degrees of separation for him to feel its weight. "That's awful."

"Yes, yes, it is. I think I want to go to his funeral," she blurts out.

Marco sits up straighter and shifts his body around. "Why?"

"I ... I don't know. I haven't been back there in forever. I just have this feeling that I should go." It feels like a magnet has attached itself to her skin, and it has a name engraved on it, "Alamosa." It's pulling her toward the small Colorado town.

"Oka-a-a-ay," he says, obviously having a hard time getting his head around the idea. "When's the funeral?"

"I'm not sure. I think Monday." The magnet tugs at her some more.

He stares at his wife for a long minute, his dark brown eyes processing the information. "You really think we should go?"

"Well, uh, I think I want to go alone." She waits for the baffled look on Marco's face to turn to hurt, but instead it twists into what she can see is sheer anger.

"Alone! Are you crazy? How? Fly?" She sees the veins pop out in his temple, a sign that the once cool and confident business owner will start to spiral from the confrontation and propel himself rapidly toward a migraine, a malady they both suffer from these days.

She takes a deep breath. "I'll drive."

He stands up and strides into the kitchen to directly address her, his head shaking back and forth with each step, dismissing the idea. "Alone? Drive across the country ... to some old high school boyfriend's funeral? Not by yourself!"

His rebuttal hits a nerve. Even though she knows she's thrown a bomb at him, she doesn't care right now. She realizes that this sudden desire to go to Jeff's funeral is a byproduct of her almost urgent need to escape, at least temporarily, this frozen ghost of a man she's been married to for more than 30 years. In New Jersey, when Olivia began having symptoms from the poisoning, Marco ignored her claims, dismissing them as hypochondria. That is, until the diagnosis from the allergist prompted him to recognize that he was experiencing the symptoms himself. It's the same thing now. She begs him to be more help to their son with the business, or to help her figure out a different business they can try and pursue in their current predicament. But he just stays stuck. His *modus operandi* is never to commit to a decision until either the answer knocks him on the head or he's given an ultimatum.

"I'll take Tucker with me. He can protect me." She can hear herself speak the words coming out of her mouth, and they sound crazy to her. She can't imagine what's going through Marco's brain right now. She knows she should give him time to process, but ever since the poisoning, the time it takes him to process anything feels beyond tolerable.

He snorts. "Ridiculous! You're not driving across the country alone."

He should know better. Trying to tell Olivia what she can or cannot do has never worked in his or anyone else's favor. It only fuels her fire. "It's not your decision."

He pulls his head back and glares at her, his lips pulled tight in defiance. They stare at each other, a stand-off. He averts his eyes away first. He always does. "I guess I can't stop you. Can I?"

"No. You can't." Olivia holds firm, her shaking hands grasping the edge of the counter.

Marco sets down his coffee cup with a deliberate thud, glares at her in disbelief and stomps off to the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

Olivia gazes at Tucker and Boo who are at her feet, peering up at her as if to say, "What just happened?" She shrugs her shoulders at them, pulls her hands from the counter and reaches down to assure the dogs that all is okay. With that gesture, she feels a pop, a release of pressure, like that of a lid twisted from the seal of a jar.

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