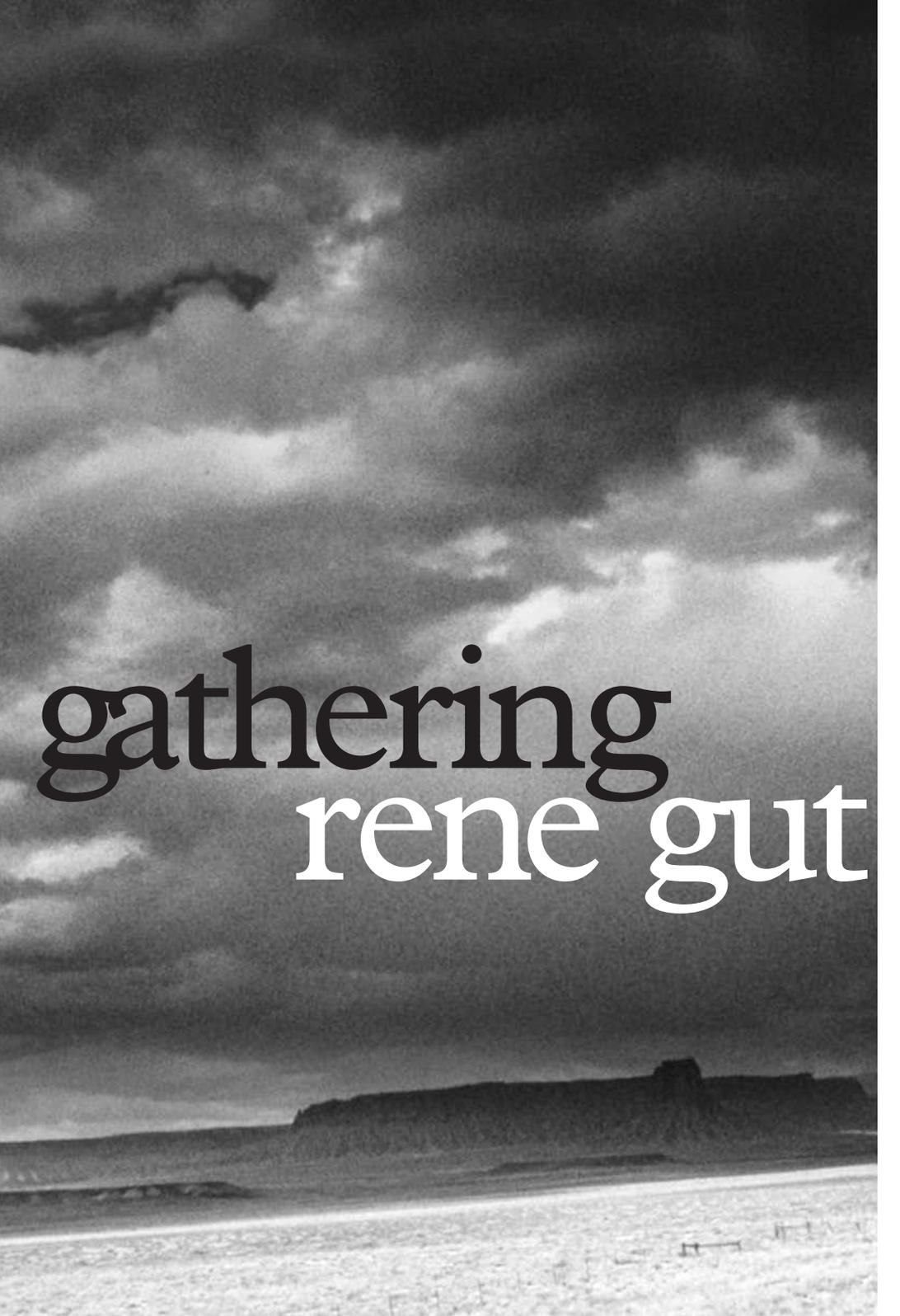
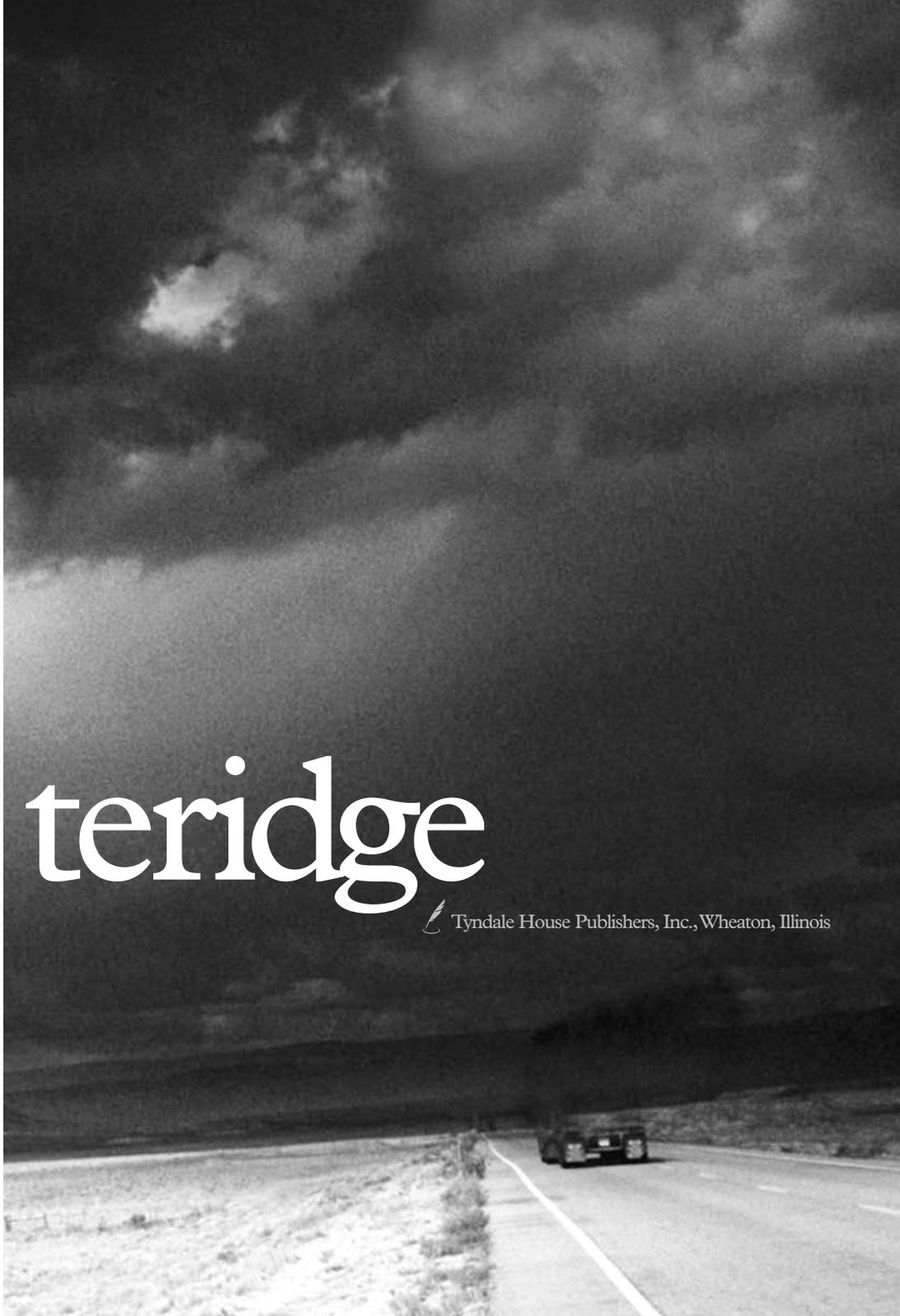




storm

A black and white photograph of a beach scene. In the foreground, there is a sandy beach with some faint tracks or debris. In the middle ground, a dark, silhouetted cliff or headland stretches across the horizon. The sky is filled with large, dramatic, and textured clouds, with some light breaking through near the horizon. The overall mood is somber and atmospheric.

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chapter one

1995

Taylor Franks stood behind the Delta ticket counter, her feet swollen from a day's worth of stress. She slipped off one of her shoes and crunched her toes toward her heel, trying to relieve the pain. She'd been on since 6 a.m.

Twisting at the waist, she popped the vertebrae in her spine while staring out the large pane of glass that gave a nice view of the planes rolling to their gates but also allowed the late-afternoon sun to make the gate area too warm.

"Hey, there." Her fellow gate agent, Liz Lane, logged on to the computer next to hers. Liz glanced up. "Looks like we got a full boat today."

Taylor nodded. A busy crowd swarmed in front of them.

Liz smiled and said, "Saw those roses in the break room."

Taylor typed in her password for the tenth time today.

"From?" Liz asked.

"Who do you think?"

"No way." Concern swept over Liz's jovial expression.

Taylor didn't want to say anything more. She couldn't. The thought of it made her stomach wilt with dread for so many more reasons than she could say. "You're a great friend, Liz."

Liz looked at her with surprise. "Well, thanks. Why do you say that?"

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Taylor concentrated on the computer screen. “You should just know that. I don’t think I’ve ever met a lovelier person.”

A dazzling grin spread across Liz’s face. “Thanks.”

The red phone at the counter rang. Taylor’s heart sank, and Liz seemed to hold in a curse. “Please tell me this isn’t what I think it is,” Liz said. She snatched up the phone and listened to the voice on the other end, glancing at Taylor and mouthing *flight operations desk*.

Liz hung up the phone. “Flight 1565 is canceled. Flight attendant got sick and they don’t have a replacement.” It meant they were about to handle a riot.

Taylor studied the oblivious crowd. A family in the corner was dressed in Hawaiian shirts. Three businessmen stood together, each holding their golf-club cases. A father tried to juggle two suitcases and a rambunctious toddler. Two kids, barely over sixteen, kissed as they sat between two elderly people with equally disapproving expressions on their faces. Taylor rubbed her fingers across her forehead.

“You okay?” Liz was looking curiously at her.

“I’m . . . um . . .”

“You’re white as a ghost!” Liz said. “Are you feeling all right?”

“This is going to be a nightmare.”

“I know, but remember our motto!”

“One passenger at a time.” Taylor checked the clock in front of her. Thirty more minutes and she would’ve been gone. Thirty more minutes.

“I’m switching the sign,” Liz said, grabbing the Delayed sign from underneath the counter.

In a few seconds, the two hundred people in front of her would all make a mad dash for the counter. Taylor wasn’t sure she could handle it. Not today. She keyed the micro-

phone. “Ladies and gentlemen, Flight 1565, service from Dallas/Fort Worth to Los Angeles, has been delayed.”

The crowd roared like a stadium full of fans just witnessing a fumble.

She kept her eyes forward, not looking at anyone directly. “A flight attendant has fallen sick, and we do not have a replacement for this flight. Another attendant is on her way, but because of regulations on how many hours a flight attendant can fly, we cannot board the plane for two hours.”

Another angry groan.

“We have another flight coming in from LA, which will be here in one and a half hours. Please approach the counter to have your tickets reissued if you do not have baggage checked. If you do have baggage checked, please go to the front ticket counters at the entrance of the airport. Thank you for your understanding and patience.”

Liz eyed her. It wasn't normal for them to send passengers back to the front ticket counter. But it was a way to manage the crowd.

A mob of bickering people shoved its way forward, businessmen pushing elderly people, women screaming at children.

A sharp line of pain traced itself over the top of Taylor's head and down her neck. And then it kicked in. Survivor mode. It always did. Her fingers flew over the keyboard while she handled each passenger swiftly and easily, hardly regarding their faces, just trying to get them to their destinations.

After she helped a family of six, a man approached the ticket counter and handed her his ticket. “What are my options?” he said gruffly.

Taylor didn't look up but instead entered his number into the computer.

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“I said, what are my options?”

“One moment, sir. I’m checking.”

“I have to get to Los Angeles by seven o’clock.”

Taylor typed in the codes. “Sir, I’m sorry. That doesn’t look poss—”

“Make it happen!” the man demanded.

Liz glanced over as Taylor jumped. “Please, settle down. I am trying to help you.”

“I don’t care if you have to put me on another airline; I want out of here. Now.”

Taylor continued to type quickly despite her shaking hands. After a few moments she swallowed down her nervousness and looked the man in the eyes. “All that’s available is a flight on American Airlines, but it won’t get there until seven thirty. Will that work?”

“That’s no good!” the man yelled.

“Sir!” Taylor gasped. “Control yourself!”

The line behind the man, at least a hundred people long, seemed oblivious to his rage. She could tell that Liz was watching his every move.

“I don’t expect you to understand,” the man said through clenched teeth, “but it is vital that I get there by seven.”

“Sir, there is nothing I can do here. You can wait and I can try to put you on the other flight coming in from LA, or you can board the one that will leave in two hours, and that will get you there by eight thirty. Or I can put you on American. All the other flights that would get you there by seven are completely booked.”

“No!” The man pounded his fist on the counter.

The people behind him hushed their conversations.

Taylor pressed her shoulders back and stared hard at the man. “Sir, I’m going to tell you this one time. Step back and lower your voice. Now.”

“Why you whiny little piece of trash,” the man seethed. “What kind of moron does it take to do this job? It’s not my fault this flight was canceled! I deserve to get on another flight! Do you hear me! I *deserve* it!”

“Step back, sir,” Taylor said, but her voice trembled.

“*Get me on another flight!*” the man shouted, sticking his finger into Taylor’s face.

Beside her, Liz picked up the phone. “We need assistance at Gate 12. We have an irate.” That was the word they used for a passenger out of control. It seemed to be an understatement today.

The man’s red face whipped toward Liz. “What do you think you’re doing, lady? Calling the cops?!” His voice had risen to a high-pitched shrill.

In the distance the pattering footsteps of the police neared.

The man drop-kicked his carry-on bag toward the gate window. It nearly hit an old man observing the scene.

Taylor backed up to the wall. She wanted to get in this man’s face. Stand up for herself. But she couldn’t. In fact, Liz was the one who called security. Shame made her knees weak. She had never been able to stand up for herself. Not to her alcoholic father. Not to her dominating supervisor. Not to her whacked-out boyfriend.

But that was all about to change.

Suddenly Taylor lunged forward. “Get out of my face, you loser!” she screamed.

The man froze. The line behind him moved back. Liz’s mouth hung open. But before Taylor could say anything else, the police seized the man and threw him to the floor. Quickly handcuffing him, they picked him up and dragged him away. He was hollering obscenities all the way out of sight.

Taylor shut her eyes, took a deep breath, and stepped

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forward, trying to smile at the next passenger, an older businessman.

“Whatever flight you can get me on is fine,” he said meekly.

Taylor typed in his passenger number, then felt a hand on her shoulder. “You better come with me,” Edward Foster, her supervisor, said. Behind him, Roger, another agent, was waiting to take her place.

“I’m fine,” Taylor said, brushing the hair out of her face. “It’s over.”

“Come with me, Miss Franks,” he said, taking her arm and forcing her toward the Jetway.

Taylor glanced at the crowd. A few sympathetic faces scattered among the mostly annoyed ones told her she might as well have been the sick flight attendant.

Inside the Jetway, Edward stopped and stood in front of her. “What was that back there?” he said in his usual demeaning tone.

“The guy went nuts.”

“So did you.”

“I just stood up for myself.” Taylor knew perfectly well that Edward couldn’t possibly understand the power she drew from this one small incident.

“That isn’t protocol, Taylor,” he said in his squeaky little voice that made her want to set a mousetrap.

Taylor bit her lip, not sure what was more maddening: Edward Foster and his dreamworld of authority or half-insane passengers with airport rage. “It’s 1995, Edward. People do crazy things these days. How was I to know that guy didn’t have a knife or something worse? I was just defending myself.”

“First of all, he’s already been checked through security, so he wouldn’t have a weapon. Secondly, screaming at him and calling him a loser wasn’t even close to appropriate. I’m

going to have to write you up. I hate to do that, but what you did back there was unacceptable.” His white blond eyebrows elevated halfway up his forehead. “Go ahead and go on home. I’ll see you tomorrow.” He turned and exited the Jetway.

Taylor was trembling from head to toe. Little did Edward know she’d just been stepped on one too many times.

The skin on Aaron’s cheek burned and tingled as if someone had struck a match against his jawbone. He panted underneath the heavy hand that was clasped over his nose and mouth. His body twisted and writhed against his brother’s. If he could only get his knee loose . . . there!

Cusswords mingled with spit spattered across Aaron’s face, but now his brother was on the ground and beneath him in one quick maneuver. Mick had always cussed like a sailor, and today was no exception. Years of anger bubbled just beneath the surface, hot lava about to spew.

“Settle down!” Aaron yelled at him.

Pinned against the ground, Mick stared hard into Aaron’s eyes, trying to catch his breath. “Don’t tell me to settle down.”

The gaping wound across Mick’s left eyebrow shimmered like the fiery indignation in his eyes. Aaron had caught him with a left hook only moments before. He had not meant to split the skin, but it had been his first instinct when Mick swung at him.

“I’m going to stand up, Mick. If you try anything again, though, I’ll put your face in the dirt and knock you unconscious.”

“I’d like to see you try that.”

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“Make a move and you’ll be licking dirt in your sleep.” Aaron rose, cautiously backing away from him.

Mick sat up, touching the back of his wrist to the wound above his brow while looking at his brother.

“You’re going to need stitches,” Aaron said.

Mick cursed again under his breath and scooted a few feet away so his back was against a large maple tree.

“My goodness, you have a mouth on you.”

“Shut up,” Mick said. “I’m so sick of your holier-than-thou act.” He stood, causing Aaron to take guard. He hobbled toward his house. “It was stupid of you to come here today. What did you think was going to happen? I’d throw my arms around you? pat you on the back? beg to be your best man?”

“I didn’t have any expectations,” Aaron said. “I just thought you should know.”

“Ah. A warning.”

“I didn’t expect you’d jump up and down. I didn’t expect you to swing at me either.”

Mick shrugged and stared at the horizon barely visible through the crowd of homes in front of him. “So you told me. What are you sticking around for? Want to go another round?”

“I’m not here to fight with you. Why are you so upset about this? You weren’t in love with her!”

Mick’s chuckle was low and deep, mixed with a groan. “Is that your justification? I wasn’t in love with her? How could I know that? You stole her three weeks into the relationship!”

“I didn’t steal her, Mick. She didn’t want to be with you.”

“Did she tell you that?”

Aaron looked away. His brother’s wrath seemed incurable. It had been four months, and he was as angry as the

day it happened. “You would’ve dumped her like every other girl you use and dump. Jenny is too special for that.”

“You don’t have to tell me she’s special. I know that. I knew it the day I met her.”

“You need to get your life together, little brother. What’s it going to take with you? You’ve already wrecked your car, nearly killed yourself, drunk out of your mind. You can’t hold a steady job, a steady relationship. You alienate almost everyone who tries to help you.”

“So I need to be more like you, is that it? Elite law enforcer. Perfect lover. Best son. Child of God.”

“Why do you always make this about us? It isn’t a competition, Mick. Can’t you see your life is spinning out of control?”

“Maybe by your standards. But the problem is, nobody can live by your standards. Have you mentioned them to Jenny yet? Have you let her know you expect her to be perfect?”

“Unbelievable!” Aaron shouted and then turned away, ripping his fingers through his hair. “You drive me crazy! I’m going to be burying my little brother someday! My only brother! Because you’re so *stubborn!*”

“You have the solution to everything, don’t you?” Mick murmured, sweeping past him in the backyard and heading to his back porch. “Go to church. Be good. Be nice. Accept the fact that my brother stole the one woman that I—” He stopped and wiped his mouth. “You can let yourself out the back gate. And don’t expect an appearance at the wedding. Frankly, I never want to see you again.” Mick opened the screen door and slammed it shut on his way in.

Mick’s temper knew how to coax Aaron into doing things he shouldn’t. How Aaron wanted to kick down that door and choke some sense into that boy!

Instead he checked his watch. He was supposed to

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meet Jenny in an hour for their regular Tuesday night dinner. He opened the gate, latched it back, and limped to his truck.

He was getting too old for these kinds of fights.

“What happened to you?” Jenny’s mouth hung open as she stood in greeting at their favorite restaurant. Aaron kissed her on the cheek and sat down. “Are you okay? Did something happen at work?”

Two bruises on either side of his left eye and a scrape across his chin and jaw were evidence enough of a doomed attempt at talking with his brother.

“I’m fine. It looks worse than it is.”

“Yeah, right. What happened?”

“I went to see Mick today.”

“You told him?”

“Yeah.”

“He hit you?”

“He didn’t take it well.”

Her eyes brimmed with tears, which they often did because of an overly tender heart that had won his affection almost immediately. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“Mick’s a loose cannon. He’s still angry. He’s been angry for a long time, way before you came along. It just all came out today.”

“I guess.”

“I think Mick had stronger feelings for you than we realized,” Aaron said, pausing as the waiter took their drink orders.

“Why do you say that?”

“Just some things he said.”

“Oh.”

“It’ll be okay.”

Jenny stared at the table, her arms folded loosely in her lap, her lips puffed with sadness.

The waiter returned and Aaron ordered for both of them. When the waiter left, Aaron couldn't contain the question any longer. "Were you ever in love with Mick?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"It's a simple one."

"Who am I sitting here with? Who am I going to marry?"

Aaron tried to smile, but her expression told him things he didn't want to hear. "You were in love with him."

"He was completely wrong for me. You know that. We've talked about it."

"We talked about how wrong he was for you. That doesn't mean you weren't in love with him."

"Why are you asking now?"

"Because I want to know."

"What does it change?"

"Nothing. On my end. But maybe it will help me understand Mick a little better," Aaron said. "When I told him today, he was so crushed. I thought you two had a casual relationship. That's how it seemed when I met you."

"It was a casual relationship. I knew the moment Mick and I met that he was trouble."

"So why did you date him?"

"I was tempted; I admit it. I'd been a good girl all my life, gone to church, dated the good, Christian guy. And then I met Mick. And he was . . ." She looked unsure if she should go on.

"I know, I know. Strikingly handsome."

"That's not what I was going to say."

"Come on," Aaron said. "It's been that way our whole lives. I was always the mature, good son with high ambitions. Mick always had the looks."

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“You’re handsome and you know it.”

“You were saying?”

“I don’t know if I should go on.”

“I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“Maybe you did. Maybe you don’t want to hear this. And maybe you shouldn’t. What good is it going to do now? I’m in love with *you*. I’m going to marry *you*, Aaron. You’re the one who I’ve waited my whole life for. You’re the one who saved me from marrying a guy like Mick.”

“Mick thinks he was in love with you.”

“I can’t speak for Mick.” She stared at the straw in her drink. “It was an intense relationship. Only three weeks. But intense. I was nearly willing to throw away all my convictions for that guy. And then I met you.” She smiled. “And I knew you were the right one for me.”

Aaron propped his head up with his hand and scratched at his forehead with his fingers. “You know, I always wanted to be Mick when we were younger. I always wanted to be that guy who could have any woman I wanted. By God’s grace I ended up with the *only* woman I ever wanted.” His grin faded with thoughts of Mick. “I’m so scared for Mick. I don’t want to see him throw his life away. All he wants to do is chase storms and women—with a shot of tequila, or whatever it is he drinks.”

“He’ll find his way,” Jenny said. “God won’t let him slip away without a fight.”