



Three months after Dad and I found Davie pinned beneath his three-wheeler in the hay field next to our house, neck broke and eyes staring empty and dim at the cloudy spring sky, we sold our farm and moved to town. Some people said it was a crying shame – they meant the loss of Davie, of course, who was only sixteen and both handsome and a hard worker. But they meant the giving up, too. The cashing in of land Dad's family had worked for three generations. Land they'd held onto through wet years and dry, booms and near busts.

Mom said if she had to look out her window and into that field one more day she'd blow her head off right there at the kitchen sink.

I said, Please don't, and God why? and Damn you anyway.

But Dad? Dad never said a word. Just signed the papers the man from the bank put in front of him, grabbed his hat off the table and left. We didn't see him for two whole days. I didn't see Mom either, but I heard her, sobbing in Davie's room, shuffling around clothes and books and the collection of miniature tractors and combines he kept on a shelf above his bed.

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"You want this?" Mom says Monday morning as I run out the door to the school bus. She catches the screen before it slams and holds out Davie's Walkman.

I drop my lunchbox and grab the cassette player, pressing it against my chest as I race across the lawn to the bus. I slip into the seat behind the driver and pull the headphones over my ears. I don't have to eject the tape to know what it is. Davie'd been listening to Hank Williams Jr.'s *Major Moves* since Mom bought him a pile of tapes and the Walkman for his birthday. And I'd been listening with him. He'd rigged a spot in Dad's pickup for his boombox and whenever Dad let him take the truck, he'd stuff the tape in the deck, crank up the volume, and blast Hank Jr.

I don't have to turn up the volume. It's still set where Davie'd had it last. So is the tape. I hit play, and the final notes of "All My Rowdy Friends" blast my ears. I press rewind, wanting to hear everything Davie'd heard. I hit play again. As Hank Jr.'s voice booms through the headphones, I remember the last time we'd listened to this song. The last time we'd hung out – just the two of us. Davie'd picked me up from school. He was out early, a week's gap between the end of basketball and the start of baseball, and he'd run to town to get a part from the hardware store. We took the long way home, out to the wildlife refuge and down Stateline Road, laughing and singing and talking about school and baseball and which girl he was thinking of asking to Prom. He stopped at the Stateline store, pulling into the pickup-lined dirt parking lot. Davie nodded at the group of farmers, the same chin-up motion everyone does around here.

"You pitching this year?" one of men asked. I recognized him from the feed store. An old high school buddy, Dad explained. Mom just called him that old drunk.

Davie shrugged. "Up to coach."

The man reached into the bed of his pickup and pulled out a beer. He popped the tab and shoved it toward me. "You kids want one?"

I backed away, shaking my head.

The men laughed as Davie ushered me inside. He headed to the cooler and grabbed a bottle of Pepsi from the case. "Orange or grape?" He pointed at the too-bright bottles of Crush.

"Orange." I held up a Milky Way bar. "And this?"

Davie winked. "Don't tell Mom."

A sob wrenches out of me, and before the song is finished, I'm bawling. Full out. Tears and snot and everything. It's a miracle I don't throw up.

Sarah Nichols, a girl I've known since kindergarten and who nobody even liked until the middle of this year when she became the first girl in our fifth grade class to actually need a bra, rolls her eyes. "Freak." Even though she's all the way across the aisle from me in an entirely different seat, she makes a big show of scooting away. She slides as close to the window as she can and glares at me.

I don't care. In three months time I've gone from, "Laurie Elizabeth, come sit by me," to "Poor Laurie Elizabeth," to "Laurie Elizabeth – Weirdo. Spaz. Loser." Now Sarah Nichols will probably add "Laurie Elizabeth – Crybaby Freak" to the list. So what? School's almost out, and I won't have to see anyone for the whole summer if I don't want to. I hit rewind and queue up "All My Rowdy Friends" again. I play it all the way through, then rewind it again. Play. Rewind. Play. The whole eight miles to



school, sobbing and singing and ignoring everyone's pleas for me to just shut up already.

Dad's pickup is at the farm when the bus drops me off at the end of the day. He's at the kitchen table, eating a tuna sandwich and drinking a Budweiser. "Pack your stuff."

I do. We all do. And in a week, we've stuffed all we can into the two-bedroom duplex Dad rented in the middle of town. What doesn't fit is auctioned off by a small, stern woman from the next town over. I refuse to go to the auction. So does Dad. We sit in the dark living room of the duplex. Dad drinks beer, and I eat chips, and together we play all of Davie's tapes – one after another – while Mom heads to the farm to see which of our neighbors ends up with her mother's china cabinet and Davie's bed.

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I'm up early. An old farm habit I can't seem to shake despite having no chores to speak of and no animals to feed. Dad's already gone. To the coffee shop, I suppose. Then to whatever work he's managed to put together this week. Welding someone's baler. Moving sprinklers. Farm labor. Paid by the day. Take what you get. I'm only eleven and even I know it's a step down. I wonder what they call him behind his back. "David Johnson – Unlucky bastard." "David Johnson – Failure." "David Johnson – Drunk." That's what Mom calls him now. Whenever he's late. Whenever she's mad. Whenever she remembers I'm in the room. "If that no good drunk doesn't want his dinner..." "If that useless drunk would just..." "If your drunk of a father wrecks the truck again..."

I creep by her closed bedroom door and head to the kitchen. I pull the refrigerator door open and push aside the beer cans until I find the package of hamburger mom took out of the freezer last night. I set it on the counter, then grab two slices of bologna, the Miracle Whip, and a jar of mustard. I make a sandwich, snatch a Pepsi out of the freezer, and fill my thermos with water. I wrap the hamburger in a grocery bag, and stuff the rest of it, plus a small plastic baggie of Fritos, into my lunchbox. I slide a Pop-Tart out of the box by the toaster, and cram the pastry in my mouth while I write Mom a note. Went for a bike ride. Be home for dinner. I consider adding a line. Love maybe. Or Hope you have a good day. Or even Sorry about the hamburger. But I don't. I don't even tell her where I'll be. Why should I? She never asks anymore, and if she cared at all she'd have gotten up to check.

I strap my watch on my wrist, grab my lunch and my transistor radio, and head out into the already warm air. The front door clicks closed behind me and for the hundredth time this summer I miss the whip bang of our old screen. I miss Mom's sharp "Stop slamming that door," following me down the steps, and the tickle of excitement I always got when I set off into another summer morning.

Away from the farm, the days are endless. Long and hot, and whatever excitement they used to hold died with Davie and spring and the paper from the bank. Now, it's all paved streets, and store fronts, and our neighbor, Mrs. Voss, yelling at me for stepping in her flower beds or leaving my toys in the shared driveway.

I get my bike from the side of the house where I propped it last night and put the meat and the lunchbox into the basket. I tune the radio to a country station, even though what I really want to listen to is the loud, long hair, leather pants music that comes on late at night from the college station in Klamath. But that station only works if you have the antenna pointed just right and the sky is totally clear.

The music sounds just like I feel inside when it's dark and Dad still hasn't come home and I can't sleep because my stomach is all jumbled up and my head feels like it's about to explode from the quiet. Mom would hate it. Davie would have, too. But I think Dad might

**But I think Dad might like it if he heard it. I think he might understand wanting to scream. And wanting someone to hear you scream.**

like it if he heard it. I think he might understand wanting to scream. And wanting someone to hear you scream.

I prop the radio up next to the lunchbox and secure it with a bungee cord. I hop on the bike, cross the highway, and pedal out of town while the DJ reminds everyone to be careful with their Fourth of July fireworks tonight.

I'd forgotten it was the Fourth. Last year we went to the fairgrounds and watched the fireworks. All of us. Mom and Dad and Davie, too – even though his friends begged him to go into town to watch the big show over the lake. He sat with us on the bleachers and drank a Coke and oohed and awed like a little kid. And nothing caught fire. And no one drove the truck in the ditch. And Mom and Dad didn't fight – not even when he spent too long at the concession stand talking to the guy from the tractor place and her hotdog got cold. It was a good night. A perfect Fourth.

I shake the memory loose and glide onto Stateline Road as the Judds twang on about some guy who won't settle down. There's hardly any traffic, so I take up the whole road, weaving from one side to the other and back again. I love Stateline Road. I love how it cuts right down the middle of Oregon and California. How on one side, I'm me. Plain old Laurie Elizabeth Johnson. Eleven years old. Brown hair. Brown eyes. A native Oregonian. But on the other side I'm a totally different Laurie Elizabeth. I'm someone from somewhere. A traveler. A tourist. An explorer. The kind of person who leaves her home and sets off on an adventure into an entirely new state. A kid who might forget the rules about sales tax and bottle deposits, but still likes that it's weird and new and different. A girl who believes that

good things can happen. That all you have to do is keep your eyes open and notice when they do.

I spend most of my time on the California side of the road. I count the bald eagles perched on the power lines, heads tilted, eyeing the field for mice. I swerve when a coyote darts in front of me, and I watch as he jumps the pasture fence and slinks down the ditch bank. And I nearly tumble off my bike when a pheasant blasts out of an alfalfa field and whooshes over the top of my head. I'm feeling so good, so light, so free, that I almost miss Malone Road. I almost miss the farm.

Something catches in my chest, and I force myself to breathe. I wrench my handlebars to the left and shoot across the highway, forgetting to look and getting a "Hey!" and a shaking fist from some guy tooling along in a tractor. I shrug and keep pedaling until I'm on the road in front of our old house. Home. I click the radio off.

I look at the field first. The field where we found Davie, broken and still. Not a drop of blood anywhere. It was muddy then - just wet dirt and patchy grass. It's in alfalfa now. The fresh green scent of cut grass fills the air, and I spy a swather creeping across the back quarter. I take a deep breath. I always loved first cutting. The way the smell tickles the back of your throat. The way Dad and Davie'd squint at the sky checking for the first sign of rain. The way we'd all feel like we'd won some sort of race when it was finally cut and baled and tucked away nice and dry.

I turn to the house. The rose bushes hugging the gate. The spot of shade next to the barn where I used to play Barbies and Hot Wheels and jump rope. And the swing, hanging from the sturdiest branch of the maple tree, the wooden seat empty and still, with no breeze to move it.

A new family lives here now. Mom, Dad, and a little girl who wears frilly dresses and spits out her broccoli. My best friend Amy told me all about them when she was still talking to me, before she changed lunch tables and started hanging out with Bonnie Miller and the sixth grade girls. She said the new family was nice. That they paid a dollar an hour for babysitting and let her eat all the potato chips she wanted. She also said they painted Davie's room. Lavender, with white trim, and they put in one of those princess beds with the lace canopy that hangs down. I wonder if they saw the place on the baseboard where he'd carved his name and Little League number. Davie Johnson #34 - same as Nolan Ryan. Or if they noticed that the window screen pops right out if you push the top left corner, and the light flickers when it storms, casting shadows on the closet door in a way that is either hide-your-eyes scary or laugh-out-loud funny depending on your mood.

I lean over my handlebars and look closer at the house. I can see the mom through the front window. Shorts. T-shirt. Hair curled and loose even in this heat. I doubt she noticed anything about Davie's room. Anything about us at all. I bite my lip and inch closer.

What if I go into the yard? Just march through the gate like I own the place. What if I sit down on the board like I've done a million times and swing for all I'm worth? Swing like I'm aiming to kick the sun right out of the sky. Will she wave? Will she tap the window, quick and hard, the way Mom did to shoo starlings out of her blue feeder - the one that used to hang, heavy with seed, right there on the limb of the birch tree and now sits on a shoe box in the closet, empty and waiting? Will she skip right over the tapping and go straight for the BB gun, plinking me with BBs as I pump my legs harder, as I fly higher than the roof, higher than even the BBs will reach?

I draw a circle in the gravel with my tennis shoe. Maybe she knows who I am. Maybe I left something behind - an old school picture or one of the Polaroids Amy and I took whenever we had a sleepover. Maybe she'd offer me ice tea and let me rest in my room for a minute. Just for old time's sake. I pluck the bike's kickstand with the toe of my shoe. Maybe...

The door creaks and a little girl toddles down the steps. The woman follows, screen door whipping closed behind her. She doesn't even flinch at the crash; she just laughs and follows the girl across the yard.

"Swing!" The girl's squeal bounces between the house and the barn then sweeps over the yard, across the fence, straight into my chest. The mom scoops her from behind and plops her on the board. "Hold tight," she instructs. "Ready?"

The girl's tiny hands grip the rope.

My own hands flex against my handlebars, remembering the feel of that rope. The tickle of frayed strings on my wrist. The smooth places where my hands and Davie's hands and even Amy's hands have rubbed the rope dark with sweat and dirt. "Ready," I mutter. I turn the bike around. I lift my butt off the bicycle seat and push all my weight down on the pedals. Gravel shoots out from under my tires and the back one skids a little, jerking my body to the left, yanking me off balance. I wobble and pump harder, steering through the slide until both tires hit the pavement and my balance returns. I keep pedaling, keep steering, eyes focused straight ahead. The bike rocks side to side from my weight and speed, but still I don't slow. I pedal harder and try to bury the urge to turn around, to look back over my shoulder at the girl and the house and the swing - my swing.

I stand and pedal until I get back on Stateline Road, until even if I look back, I won't be able to see the house or the girl or the field. Then I sit down. This time I don't glide left to right, Oregon to California. And I don't count the eagles on the power lines. I just ride, staying on the Oregon side. I don't even swerve when I see the pivot sprinklers spraying across the

road. I just ride through, letting the irrigation water splat me until my shirt is soaked through and my hair is dripping.

I turn on to Hill Road and keep riding, past the deer in the fields and the quail skittering through the brush. It's harder now. The road is gravel and rutted from cars and trucks and farm machinery running up and down it all day. I hug the shoulder and ride all the way to the entrance of the Lava Beds.

Davie and his friends used to come out here all the time. They'd explore the caves or hike up to the fire lookout and talk to the crew. Sometimes they'd even come at night, with ropes and beer, and they'd explore all the places that are off limits during the day. He said when I was twelve I could go along on one of the night trips. That I would be useful – still small enough to fit into places the high school guys couldn't, but old enough to not be a baby about it.

Tears sting my eyes. Heat lines shimmer off the black lava rocks. I stop in front of Captain Jack's Stronghold and pull out my water. A day like this is meant for caving. You can spend hours underground in the cool – crawling from place to place. Looking for ice pools and bats and even artifacts the Modoc warriors might have left behind over a hundred years ago.

Davie talked about the Modocs a lot. He'd done a project in his history class one year that included maps and pictures and even an old rifle the museum lent him. He thought he might get a job here someday. He'd lead folks through the caves and teach them the history of the place. Help them see it the way he imagined the Modocs saw it way back in 1872. Help them see it the way he saw it now, in 1985.

I used to look out across all the black rock and sagebrush and wonder why Davie liked it so much. And why the Modocs even wanted it. Why anyone would fight to come back to some place with no water, no shade, no spot that wasn't sharp and pokey and liable to cut you or burn you just for walking across it. But now, I think I get it.

It was home.

Nobody should have to leave their home.

I check my watch. It's been almost three hours since I left the duplex. Mom's probably gotten out of bed by now. She's probably made some coffee and read my note and went outside to sit on the porch and stare and smoke. She'll probably still be there when I ride up at 5:00 ready for dinner.

A dust devil sweeps across the road sending dirt and sagebrush swirling. I shade my eyes while it passes, then flick the radio back on and fiddle with the antenna. It's scratchy, but I can make out Rosanne Cash. I turn it up. I like the way all her songs sound sad, like she's given up and is just waiting for someone to notice. I sing along, jerking my chin in a hey-there gesture at every car that passes. Tourists, mostly. The occasional farmer checking on the kids moving his wheel line. I ride all the way to the end of the road, past Hospital Rock and the Wildlife Refuge pullouts. I turn off before I reach the highway and head toward Petroglyph Point.

I park my bike next to a big rock and grab my lunchbox and the thermos out of my basket. I take another swig of water, then stash the thermos in a slip of shade just to the left of the rock. I grab the hamburger and tuck it underneath my arm. Then I head toward the rock wall.

The *kee-eeee-arr* of a hawk greets me as I approach the fence. I look up, shading my eyes from the sun, and scan the top of the rock

wall. Finally, I see her. A big red-tailed hawk perches on the edge of a nest. I scan the ground and spy the baby – ruffled brown feathers, sharp yellow eyes – and hear its faint cries. I've been watching this family for weeks. There used to be two babies, but last week I found one lying dead at the bottom of the rock wall. The other one was hopping on the ground next to him. I climbed the fence, not caring that it's illegal, and retrieved the dead bird. I buried it next to the pole at the end of the fence. I thought about taking the other one home, putting her in a box and raising her. But I didn't. Even I know that nature works best when it's not messed with too much. Still, I couldn't just leave it. So, I've been bringing meat. Chicken pieces and scraps from the butcher, mostly. Things no one will miss. Except today. Today I brought our dinner. I'm pretty sure Mom will miss

that. And I'm pretty sure I'll hear about it. But I don't care. Someone needs to look after this baby.

I open the package of hamburger and push the bloody meat through a hole in the chain link fence. The baby looks healthy, hopping along the fence line, flapping her little wings. I

wipe my hands on my shorts and pull the chips and sandwich out of my lunch box. I scoot back a ways from the fence and sit on the ground, so the hawk can have some privacy while it eats. I'm halfway through my sandwich when a pickup pulls into the parking lot.

Dad gets out of the truck. He has a beer and a white, waxed-paper package of meat in his hands. "Chicken livers," he says, with a shrug. "Looks like we had the same idea." Dad walks over to the fence and carefully shoves the chicken bits through the hole. He folds the paper carefully and tucks it in the back pocket of his jeans. Then he wipes his hands on the red bandana he keeps in his pocket. Finally, he comes and sits next to me.

**Why anyone would fight to come back to some place with no water, no shade, no spot that wasn't sharp and pokey and liable to cut you or burn you just for walking across it. But now, I think I get it.**

**It was home.**

**Nobody should have to leave their home.**

"You know, this used to be an island," he says as he pops open the can of beer. "The Indians would float their canoes right up to it. That's how they carved all these pictures in it."

"Davie told me."

Dad ducks his head, a quick nod, then takes a long drink of beer. "Yeah. I suppose he did."

I stuff my sandwich into my lunch box, and get up, brushing gravel off the back of my legs. I wander the fence line, stopping every so often to look closer at the carvings. "Do you know what they mean?" I point to a drawing that looks like a tree with a pointed cap on it.

Dad shrugs. "Maybe they're messages. Weather reports or maps." He gets up and wanders over to where I'm standing. He puts his hands on the chain link fence and peers through the holes. "Or maybe it was just kids. Ancient graffiti."

"Kilroy was here," I mumble.

Dad squeezes the can until the metal crunches. "Kilroy was here."

Two summers ago, Dad put up a new clothesline for Mom. He dug two holes. Then he mixed a wheelbarrow full of water and cement. Davie held one metal pole and I held the other - straight and still - while Dad shoveled globs of cement in the holes. Once the cement had almost set, Dad steadied Davie's pole and Davie knelt down and pressed a hand into the cement. Then Davie took my pole and I pressed my hand in the cement - slow and steady, careful to not smear it. One handprint for each pole. "Kilroy was here," Davie said that evening when we went out to see if the cement had dried. I fit my hand into his print and smiled, thinking that I would do that every summer, press my hand into Davie's print to see how much I'd grown - how close I was to catching up to him.

Dad stares at the ground for a long minute; then he sits back down. He finishes his beer while I walk up and down the fence, looking at the pictures and trying to imagine the people who made them, what they might have wanted, and everything they lost.

We sit like that all afternoon - silent, watching the hawks circle above, and searching the pictures on the rock wall for a sign, a message from the past that would somehow help the present make sense. Finally, Dad gets up. He brushes off his jeans and reaches for my hand. "I guess we'd better head home."

I grab my lunchbox and my thermos and follow him to the pickup. I take my radio out of my basket while he tosses his empty beer can in the bed. I lower the tailgate and Dad lifts my bike in. We climb in the cab and slam the doors. "This was Davie's favorite place," Dad says as he backs slowly out of the parking space, his eyes focused on the rearview mirror.

"I know. He told me." I roll down the window and stick my head out; I'm suddenly way too hot, way too tired.

Dad fumbles for the six pack in the seat between us, the noise drawing my attention. He meets my gaze, then pulls his hand away. "I suppose he did." He smiles his sad smile and ruffles my hair.

I reach across the console and fumble with the boombox - Davie's boombox - until the cab fills with Alabama's "Roll On." We bounce along the dirt road, not talking, but not not talking either. We're just together, listening. Every now and then one of us raises our hand, pointing out an egret or a fawn in one of the fields. I wonder if it feels to him like Davie is with us somehow. I can almost hear him singing. Screwing up the lyrics, his laugh breaking through the song. But I don't mention it. I don't want to ruin it.

When we reach the Stateline store, Dad pulls into the dirt parking lot. "I'll just be a minute," he says. I sigh and consider grabbing my bike and riding the rest of the way home. His friend is here, leaning

on his pickup, drinking beer, and talking to another farmer. If Dad stops, I'm leaving, I promise myself. I clutch the door handle. But Dad doesn't stop. He just nods to the men and disappears inside. I fiddle with the latches on my lunchbox and wait. If he gets more beer, I'm leaving.

I watch the front of the store the way the mother hawk watched her baby - alert, and with a mix of hope and dread.

The bell over the door rings as he comes out, a grocery bag in each hand and a box of sparklers tucked under his arm. He slides one of the bags onto the seat next to me. The smell of chicken and Jo-Jo potatoes makes my mouth water, but I don't take my eyes off the bag on his lap, and I don't take my hand off the door handle.

"Dinner," he smiles. The sparklers drop onto the seat. "And fireworks." He reaches into the second bag and takes out two cans of Orange Crush. He hands me a soda, then tosses a Milky Way bar onto my lap. "Don't tell your mom." He winks. It's Davie's wink. Quick and teasing.

Dad's face blurs as tears fill my eyes. I let go of the door handle. "I won't."

Dad winks again. Davie's wink. Dad's wink. They're exactly the same, but it's Dad's smile that makes me grin.

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town in Oregon with her husband and three cats. Her first novel, *The Tragically True Adventures of Kit Donovan*, is scheduled for release Spring 2017.