

WHEN GUNS ARE LAW,  
NOTHING IS FORGIVEN

**BLUE  
RUNNING**

**LORI ANN  
STEPHENS**

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MOONFLOWER

Texas, our Texas! All hail the mighty State!  
Texas, our Texas! So wonderful so great!  
Boldest and grandest, withstanding ev'ry test;  
O Empire wide and glorious, you stand supremely blest.  
God bless you Texas! and keep you brave and strong,  
That you may grow in power and worth, thro'out the ages long

Texas State Song, 1929

# BLESSING

In Blessing, we were all under the eye or the heel of God, and neither was very comfortable. You could get away with a lot in the piney woods of East Texas, but as Daw liked to say, soon your sins will seek you out. And even though my father was an occasional drunk and frequent bastard, I tended to agree with him. Depending upon the secrets in our hearts, here came God's blessing or curse, cutting across the main farm road, stirring up leaves or dropping cardinals like darts, delivering cows into the mouths of tornadoes or painting sunsets as vast and pink as a long-held breath.

Do you remember Blessing like that? God's Country. It was ours to inhabit. We knew every house in the neighborhood, every car. Every blacktop street that stuck to our bike tires in August. All the paved ones that turned into gravel and then, farther on, piddled out into dirt roads that meandered across the country like cattle dogs. We knew how to get back home, where we'd use a stick to pry the gooey pebbles and dirt from our treads. We knew that outsiders were unwanted, and that three churches in a town with two traffic lights was like splitting an election, but at least all the candidates were Republican. Before we were ten, we knew the police station and the liquor store and Mack's Insurance and the First Republic Bank on Main St, and on Elmwood Lane the karate school and the Italian restaurant and the Corner Grocery and the empty store that had been For Rent for ages and ages. And farther down, a church and two schools. Three miles across the flood plain, the Gulf gas station, wallpapered with decades of cigarette smoke and short-order grease, was the most reliable source of news. Everything else

was in the next town, too far and too dangerous for a kid to go on a bike.

Texas was beautiful and ugly, kind and cruel, and every child knew it. That's how war is. Even ten years after The Secession, we carried it in our bones as we climbed the steps onto the bus, saluted the Lone Star flag, and sang our allegiance.

This is the story you missed. This was fourteen, the tender year. This was one month from Blessing to freedom, and the price we paid.

# ONE

I once had a mother who loved me.

“She just didn’t love you enough,” Daw liked to say. He’d sniff and smirk like a father does when he’s confronted with the mysterious eyes of his fourteen-year-old daughter. Then he’d crush his beer can under his boot. That was the start and the end of any conversation about my mother.

She didn’t love you enough. The crush of aluminum. The smell of warm beer.

She left us before the Wall, so I fashioned a memory of her from other things that were too delicate and expensive for me and Daw to have. Her eyes were flecks of gold, her laugh wind chimes. Then, when I was in third grade, I stumbled on an old photograph in Daw’s drawer and I didn’t have to imagine anymore. Instead of finding a clean pair of socks, I’d dug up a pretty blonde woman in a white robe. I suspected it was my mother right away. She was laughing, and her bare knees peeked out from the robe as she leaned sideways. I wondered if she was naked underneath. I wondered if Daw had taken the snapshot. Had Daw ever been funny enough to make a woman laugh? I traced her cheek with my finger. I’d never laughed that hard or looked that pretty. It seemed impossible that I could be related to her. But on the back of the photo was my mother’s name: Marla. I slid my finger over her smooth hair, then tucked the photograph back into Daw’s dresser. Even at eight I knew she was Daw’s secret, not mine.

I didn’t hate her for leaving us, but I did wish Marla had hung around long enough to tell me how to *be*. I’d spent my

entire life in Blessing, but I never felt like a Blessing girl. My hair was never long-long, never seemed to grow past my shoulders no matter how long I let it grow. I didn't have sleep-over friends, and I wasn't good at skeet shooting or cheerleading. I didn't know how to laugh that way girls did, and make the boys want to inch closer and rub their shoulders. I didn't want boys to rub me anywhere.

When we were younger, kids who were lucky enough to have birthday parties invited everyone in class. That was the only polite thing to do. I'd been to some of these gatherings, seen the insides of a few houses. Those smells in other houses – clean laundry, warm pecan pies, vanilla candles, musky-sweet cat fur – were secrets I took home with me, all of them a comfort that life could be better. Eventually though, we got old enough to throw politeness to the wind and only invited our real friends to birthdays.

I was short and flat-chested and my dad was a drunk. I hadn't been to a party in three years.

Then, the year I turned fourteen, Maggie Wisdom moved to Blessing. She wasn't like the rest of us. Her clothes were too fancy and her heels were too high. She talked too fast and she didn't wear boots. I was the only one who sat beside her on her first day of school and found out she was from Austin, which explained practically everything. On the bus home, I found out her daddy was rich. They were the ones who'd built the mansion at the top of the hill.

I had her for the whole summer. For three months, people stopped talking about Blue's drunk daddy and Blue's ugly clothes because they were talking about Maggie, who'd somehow charmed the whole of Blessing with her money and her camera-flash teeth and her talent for singing like an angel



and skeet shooting like the devil. For the first time, I was almost normal.

Then high school started, and the Pretty Ones patted a stool at lunch and Maggie sat down at the far end of the cafeteria. She fit right in with them. Maggie stopped sitting with me and things went back to the way they used to be.

It was almost as if Maggie and I hadn't ever gone on bike rides that lasted all day, hadn't freed the squirrel from the mouse trap, hadn't drawn tattoos on each other's wrists with permanent marker. Almost as if I'd imagined she was my best friend.

That September, during the first weeks of high school, I found myself hopelessly lost in the wrong wing of the school, in real life and in my nightmares. Everyone was so tall and the halls were so wide. Between classes, I trailed behind strangers who laughed and teased and jostled each other, all of us wading our way to the next class. Swept by a strange desperation, I once laughed with a group of older girls in front of me like I belonged to them, until one of them turned around and smirked, "Why are *you* laughing, girl?" I shrugged and ducked away, my cheeks hot with shame.

In the cafeteria one day, I opened my lunch bag and stared at the peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Wrinkly apple. Broken cookies. I missed Maggie's lunches. Trading my broken cookies for her Babybel cheese wheels because her mom didn't buy sugar treats and my Daw didn't buy fancy cheese. I loved to pull that white tab across the red wax, which opened up like a perfect little present each time. But Maggie was with the Pretty Ones now.

The end of the day was no better. The Armory line was clogged up again because somebody's cartridge was missing.

“I’ve told y’all before,” the Armory Secretary yelled. “Have your IDs out and get in a straight line. Y’all won’t get home till five if you don’t get lined up right. I swear to God.”

The freshmen weren’t used to the checkout process, so it took us longer than the sophomores to get holstered and out the doors. Most of us carried hand-me-down guns from older brothers and sisters, but I was an only child and Daw was the only deputy, so I got his old police-issue Glock. It was too big for my hands and too damn heavy, but it shot straight.

I climbed onto Bus 5 and hurried to the first window seat. While we waited, I searched for Maggie on the school steps again, where she always waited for her mom to pick her up. A few times, I’d caught a glimpse of her and I smiled. She always smiled back, but a little too politely. But today there were no smiles, no Maggie, as Bus 5 rolled out of the lot and onto the farm road. It carried us away from the matchbox houses near the school, across the long, vast floodplain, where the yellow grass was stiff from drought, past the rusted, empty horse shed and the giant oak where the cows sat in the shade of its sprawling branches like black stones in the distance. We passed the only new housing development in the county, with two fancy houses made of limestone and brick, then turned onto the tar road with its craters and cracks that the bus driver weaved around at a crawl.

The Armory Secretary was right: by the time the bus dumped me off at the stop sign, it was close to five o’clock. I walked down the long gravel path to our mobile home, kicking pebbles into the grass and trying not to look at my home. We lived in a white single-wide with the skirt half torn away, black trash bin overflowing, a scraggly rose bush we’d planted a few years back when Daw was sober and cared about things for a while. The rose bush was the only thing that hadn’t died, and it

had enough breath to spit out one yellow rose every year. That said, our home wasn't much worse than the others that lined Mountain View Road, where there were no mountains and no views to speak of.

Daw's patrol car wasn't in the driveway, so I climbed the sagging wooden steps, pulled open the screen door, and tossed my backpack on the couch. I went straight to Daw's room and pulled my mother's photo from the back of the drawer so I could talk to Marla, which I'd gotten into the habit of doing. I crossed over to the window where the light was better, stared at her creased eyes and called her to me. She rose like a ghost, laughing at some joke I told, her voice bubbling over in giggles. In about thirty seconds, she'd be in tears. She'd end up with a stitch in her side, bent over and smiling through the pain. Then she would straighten up and cock her head and look straight into the hurt I was hiding. She would know what to tell me. If she were still here, she'd know how to fix everything with me and Maggie. Make us friends again.

Some movement made me look out Daw's window. Too late, I saw the glint of Daw's patrol car parked in the back yard. I'd been so lost in thought I hadn't heard him drive up. My heart skipped up into my throat even before I realized he was standing in the room behind me.

"What are you doing in here?" Daw said.

I tucked Marla's photo in my front pocket and turned around to find he was standing in the doorway watching me.

"Hi, Daw. There you are. How was work?" I moved over to the dresser and stepped backwards, slowly pushing the top drawer back in place.

I could always tell when he'd been drinking – his breath smelled like rusty nails and his left eye drooped. If he was drunk, he'd fall into bed soon and I wouldn't have to cook dinner. I'd

just make a peanut butter sandwich for myself. But if he was sober, he'd ask me a thousand questions and find a problem with every single answer.

"You got any laundry to wash?" I leaned over and picked up something heavy from the floor. It was hard to tell in his room full of shadows, but the musty smell told me I'd picked up a pair of jeans, the belt still looped through. I grabbed an old sock and a pair of boxers crumpled on the floor. "I thought I'd get started early because I got homework."

When I passed him, I took a whiff and wrinkled my nose. Rusty nails.

"That's real nice," he said, half burping out the last word. "Hey, Blue. You missed one." He pointed to a sock half-hidden under his bed.

I grabbed it, and Daw followed me to the washing machine.

"Watch your step," I said. The washing machine had leaked last year, and now the floor around it had bloated up and creaked under foot. I kind of hopped over the soft spot. Once or twice a week, we'd say out loud, "We got to fix that board," but nothing ever came of it.

"We got to fix that board," Daw said. He leaned against the wall and watched me toss his clothes into the machine. There were still some clothes in the tub, forgotten from last week and soured, so I turned the dial, tossed in a half-scoop of detergent, and washed the whole lot.

"How was school?" he asked, trailing behind me to the kitchen like a puppy.

"Fine," I lied. He didn't know that Maggie and I hadn't spoken much since classes began. I knew better than to tell him, because I didn't want him to say bad things about Maggie or the Wisdoms, because that's what Daw did. He'd let little things get

under his skin like a splinter and fester until he said things people didn't like.

"How was work?" I opened the fridge and pulled out the peanut butter and grape jelly. "I hate cold peanut butter."

"Why you keep it in the fridge then?"

"'Cause the roaches."

"Yeah," he said, then half-swallowed another belch. "We got to fix them. I need a beer."

I leaned into the fridge. Seemed like he'd had two six packs in there that morning, and now there were only two cans left. I considered hiding the beer behind the potatoes, but I wasn't good at hiding things from Daw.

I pulled a can from the top shelf, opened it, and set it on the table. I sat across from him. Part of me wanted Daw to talk like we used to. Part of me wanted him to go back to work. When I was little, he'd come home a few hours after the bus dropped me off, and I'd be waiting for him, kneeling on the couch, looking out through the window, aching to hear about how the world needed saving and he was up for the job. He'd erase the drudgery of school and the cruel teachers and the crueler kids. But then he failed the Ranger exam and started drinking and ranting about California and the Scalpers and inflation and why is the house such a pigsty and couldn't I clean up just once in a while around here?

Daw threw back his beer. He caught me watching him and gave me an odd squint, like he didn't recognize me. Or maybe he was about to catch me with that photograph in my pocket.

I walked over to where I'd dropped my backpack and fished out my notebook. I wasn't used to Daw being home so early. His eyes followed me around.

“Why are you looking at me?” I said as I set my notebook on the table.

“I’m not lookin’ at you,” he said.

He watched as I hunted through the junk drawer and settled on a nubby pencil without an eraser before coming back to the table.

“You’re watching,” I said.

I’d rather have had the old days, when he’d come home with stories about illegals that passed through, and how he nearly got shot. Sometimes he actually did get shot, though. The first time I stitched him up I was nine. He’d come home with a forehead of meat, bleeding into a rag, and before I realized what was happening, I had a needle in my hand and my heart in my throat.

“Come on, now. Stop crying,” he’d said.

“Why can’t we go to the doctor?” I’d asked, nearly beside myself.

“Because we can’t.”

“I can’t do it.”

“Yes, you can, but you have to stop crying.”

“Let’s go to the hospital. Please?” I’d begged.

“I don’t have the money, Blue. I still owe them that twenty-five grand from seven years ago, and I’ll be damned if they’re going to charge me another goddamn penny.”

“It’s going to hurt. I don’t want to—”

“Blue!” Daw had snapped, grabbing my free hand. “Just sew my damn head up.” He was frustrated, but still gave me a crooked smile, which gave me the courage to stick the needle into the edge of his brow, push it through the skin, and draw up the thread. When I pinched the skin tight, the wound didn’t look so scary, and Daw didn’t flinch once, even with all the blood. He distracted both of us by complaining about the hospital bills,

the insurance crooks, and rich doctors who only cared about paying off their fancy yachts and beach houses in Galveston.

I'd bandaged and stitched up Daw four or five times since then. My hands hardly trembled anymore, and Daw said I was so efficient with the whole process – sterilizing and threading the needle, the peroxide and cotton balls and bandages I kept all in a box – I could open my own hospital.

The scar at the edge of his brow was the worst of all my stitches, but even that jagged line was just a pink etching now.

I felt bad for him. He didn't have any friends either. We were two losers, sitting in a mobile home with rotting floorboards and a roach problem.

An hour later, Daw was passed out on the couch, and I was finished with my homework and stirring mac and cheese. Except the milk had gone bad, so I had to use water.

I wondered what Maggie was having for dinner at her shiny table with the candlesticks and cloth napkins. Her father was probably talking about things mayors talked about, and Mrs. Wisdom was no doubt calling Maggie to the table for the third time.

I stirred the liquid cheese and wondered what Marla was eating wherever she was, smiling with her head tossed back and her hair shimmering.