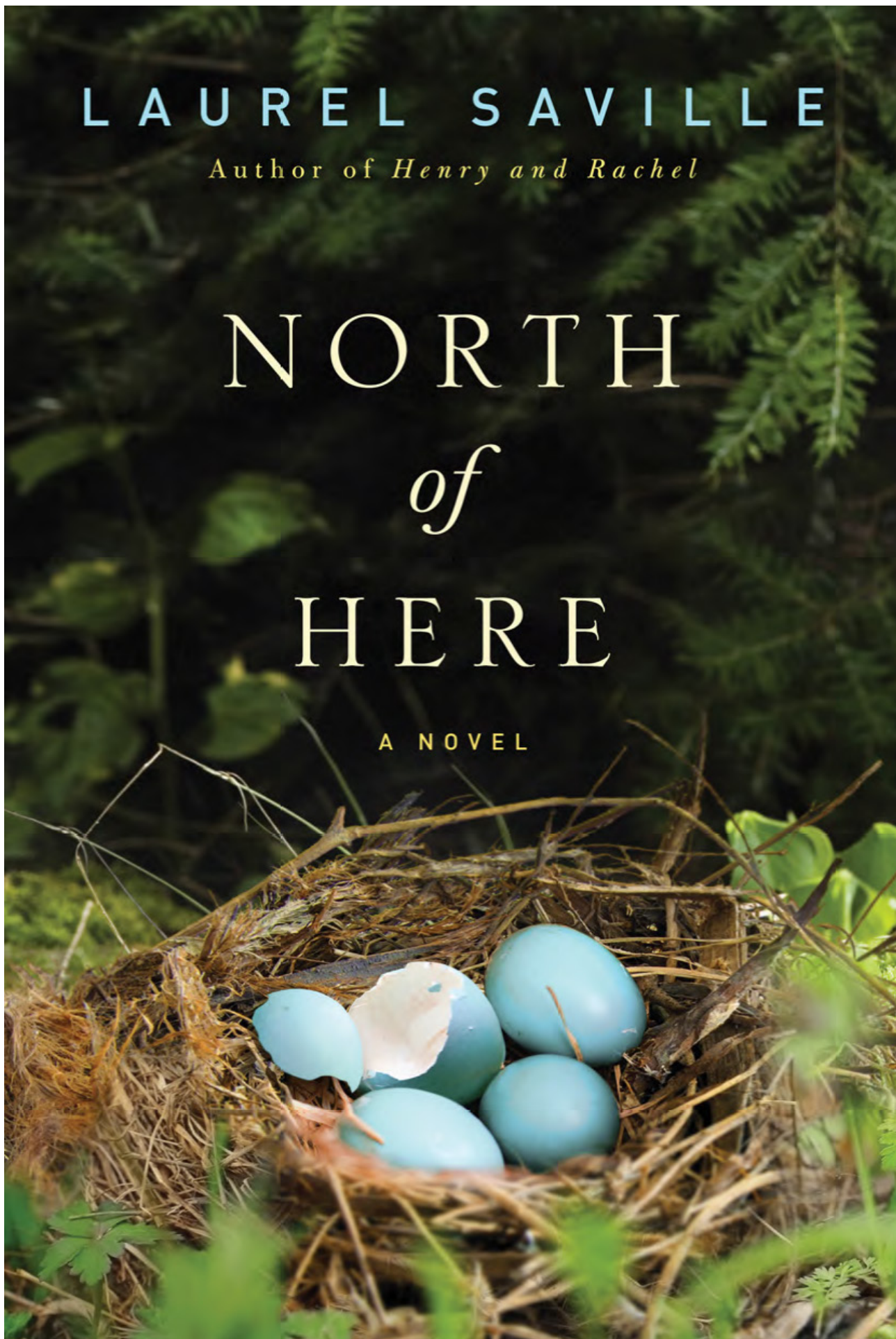


LAUREL SAVILLE

Author of Henry and Rachel

NORTH
of
HERE

A NOVEL



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N O R T H O F H E R E

OTHER TITLES BY LAUREL SAVILLE

Unraveling Anne

Henry and Rachel

NORTH OF HERE

LAUREL SAVILLE

LAKE UNION
PUBLISHING

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MIRANDA AND DIX

DARIUS AND SALLY

DARIUS AND MIRANDA

DIX AND SALLY

MIRANDA AND DIX

As Miranda moved through the house, putting away a load of laundry, picking up the glass her mother left in the living room the previous night, straightening the magazines on the coffee table, removing a few dead flowers from a vase, she found herself glancing out of each window, her view of him coming and going, her perspective on him a bit different from each vantage point. He was like a man inside a kaleidoscope to her, fractured bits and pieces coming together and moving apart and then coming together again in a slightly different form.

There he was again, hoisting an ax overhead, then crashing it down on a bucked-up piece of wood with a force so fluid, so skillful, the log seemed to split willingly, happily, obediently.

Then he was on his back in the gravel driveway, his body half-buried underneath the tractor her father kept for other men to use, his long, lanky legs sticking out as if they were another part of the machine itself.

Later he was up on a ladder, reattaching something to the ridge of the barn, something that had been making a gentle flapping noise in the night. It was a sound that drove her mother crazy, but which Miranda knew she'd miss once it was gone because otherwise the nights were filled with a quiet so deep, so pervasive, she sometimes felt compelled to walk out into it, to see if there was substance or feeling in it, as if it were a dark lake in which she might be contented to drown.

She paused by a window that framed his figure on the ladder. She counted the rungs partially obscured by his body. One, two, three, four for his legs alone. His stiff Carhartts—for that’s what they called them up here, not just canvas pants; no, they were a particular type of work pants that deserved the respect of a proper name—gave shape and form to his legs, which accounted for so much of his height. His hair, obviously long not by decision but by simple inattention, sprang out from under the ball cap that shaded his eyes, already framed by wrinkles earned by years of working outdoors, even though she knew he was just thirty. She wasn’t sure how she knew that. Something she had overheard. Her father pressing him about his future plans or something. A challenge Dix would have dealt with as he did most things, with the hint of a smile, a few words, and then the taking up of a tool of some sort.

“Marshall!”

Her father’s voice leaped in the open window, making Miranda flinch. The man on the ladder kept at his methodical, precise hammering.

“Marshall!”

This time a bark. Then her father came into view, reading glasses in one hand, drinking glass in the other. Miranda reflexively checked the clock. 4:19. Part of the unwritten WASP rulebook: Drinking could commence anytime after four. Any earlier would be unseemly. Unless, of course, there was a barbecue. Then beer could be consumed with impunity. After all, that didn’t really count as alcohol. Especially if it came from a can. Her father was wearing boat shoes and wide wale corduroys, a button-down shirt, sleeves rolled up. He was dark blue on the bottom, light pink on top, a green web belt delineating his middle. He was broad in the shoulders and all the way down to his hips. A square block of a man. Not fat, expansive. Steely wisps of hair rose and fell on the top of his mottled head in the early summer breeze as he strode across the lawn that

the man he was yelling at had mown for him earlier in the day. He reached the foot of the ladder and tried again.

“Marshall!”

When even this did not elicit a response, Miranda’s father banged the flat of his hand against the ladder. The hammering stopped and the shaggy head up by the roof inclined itself downward.

He’ll never learn, Miranda thought.

Everyone called the man on the ladder Dix. Like the term *Carhartt*, the single name and the way it was said had certain implications for the people in the valley. No further explanation was required. Dix. Local, competent, someone to be trusted. Someone who could take care of himself. And you. Without making you feel as if you could not take care of yourself. If only you had more time and less money. Which of course was untrue, but never stated. Because then men like Miranda’s father would try to prove you wrong. Which would lead to you being out of work and to men like Miranda’s father being injured.

Miranda could not hear what was being said, but saw her father pull a piece of paper out of his pocket. A list of chores. Their first few weeks here in the summer always went like this, with Dix pointing out all the things he had done over the winter to keep the place sound and her father pointing out all the projects he wanted done to make the place look better. The items on their lists never overlapped. As a teenager, Miranda had never noticed any of the various and divergent things that either man cared about. She had barely even noticed either of the men. But things were different now.

She had been out of college for a year. She hadn’t figured out what to do next. A degree in anthropology with a minor in environmental studies didn’t give her a lot of options. Her summers had been spent with volunteer work, AmeriCorps, Habitat for Humanity, a trip overseas

to interview African women about their children, how they cared for them. The only thing she felt she knew was that she wanted to help people. She wanted to help heal what was wrong in the world. But the problems seemed so big and overwhelming. So numerous and various. She had spent months removing invasive species from a conservation area and replanting native shrubs and trees. But instead of feeling accomplishment, she had felt discouraged by the knowledge that just over the next ridge, the invasives were setting seeds and sending out runners, ready to recolonize any bare patch of land. The low-income house she had helped build was given to one family on a list of dozens who were waiting and waiting. Miranda had a difficult time focusing on what had been done instead of what there was left to do. She found herself sighing a lot. Her mother hated the sound of her sighing.

Her parents had suggested she take the past year off. As if there were something concrete in front of her that she was merely postponing instead of just the empty road of an unknown future. They had told her to enjoy herself, suggested she have some fun. She wasn't sure what that meant. She knew they thought she took herself—not the world around her, but herself—far too seriously.

The unstated subtext within this mild criticism was that she should be more like her brother. At least, that's what the implication used to be, until his insistence on fun had resulted in such devastating consequences. Miranda had spent some time visiting a few friends, looking for ideas and inspiration as much as company, but most of them had jobs—many in the firms of their fathers or their fathers' friends or their friends' fathers. They were busy and she was not. She had volunteered at a women's correctional facility and had been dumbfounded by the inmates' casual acceptance of a stint in jail as a kind of respite from the outside world and by their sense of entitlement about all they were “due” while incarcerated. She thought they'd be appreciative of

her sincere desire to help them improve themselves and had been shocked to find they were neither thankful nor interested. She looked on job-listing websites that catered to nonprofits, sent out a few résumés, but never heard back from anyone. Time drifted by—an endless, uninterrupted horizon of loosely structured days.

In the middle of winter, Miranda had moved from her family’s two-hundred-year-old, white-clad-and-green-shuttered Colonial on a leafy cul-de-sac in Connecticut where she had grown up to their imposing, traditionally built log “cabin” in the densely wooded mountains of the Adirondacks. She had wanted to get away from watching her mother fill her days with small tasks that accomplished little more than taking up time, like getting a mani-pedi, fluffing the pillows on the sofa in the rarely used living room, flipping through a catalog and folding down corners on pages with pictures of things she’d never get around to ordering, writing thank-you notes to hostesses of cocktail parties and fund-raisers, or standing over the gardener as he kneeled in the dirt, pointing out weeds that needed to be plucked or flowers that needed to be dead-headed.

Once in the mountains, Miranda put in a few hours here and there trading work for next season’s produce at a mostly fallow, local, small-scale, organic farm and tutored middle-school kids at the library two afternoons a week. She found herself astonished at their ignorance not just of grammar but of things like checkbooks, mangoes, the location or relevance of a particular European city. So many of these children lived in a moment-by-moment world with little room for what Miranda was slowly starting to realize were luxuries: curiosity, ambition, and reflection. They came in with dirt-caked fingernails, amid a swirl of acrid barn smells, reminding her of the Pigpen character in the *Peanuts* comic. They casually spiced their everyday speech with the harsh pepper of swear words. They saw their time with her as a kind of punishment, not an

opportunity for enrichment. Which is exactly how their teachers had presented it to them—remediation for poor performance. In between, when the weather was decent—which it rarely was, being more commonly either too cold and too snowy, or, later in the year, too buggy and too hot—she took long hikes through the thick woods, enjoying the comfort of being hemmed in on all sides by dense walls of trees.

During the colder months, Miranda's parents came up only one weekend a month. If that. Miranda soaked up the solitude in between their visits and avoided making any decisions.

Then her brother died.

Her mother couldn't stand to be in the house that reminded her so much of him, so she fled Connecticut for the mountains. In the aftermath of his death and her mother's arrival, Miranda gave up the tutoring. She had meant to go back to it, but she began to watch her mother instead. How long she lingered in the big bed made of logs, to match the house. How long she sat in the birch rocker, staring out the window, her hands trembling ever so slightly in her lap. How little tonic she mixed with her gin when she poured it into the glass with the moose printed on the side.

Then her father started coming around more often and staying longer. When spring hit with the full force of greenery pushing its way past the thick curtain of winter's gray, instead of his usual Friday-evening-to-Monday-morning, every-other-weekend routine, he'd increasingly show up Thursday afternoons and extend his trip until Tuesday mornings. He, like Miranda, watched his wife as if she were a pot set carefully on a low simmer, but that still might miraculously boil over. Miranda never saw her father cry about her brother. The only thing that changed about him was a certain lopsided set to his mouth. It had always been there, but was made more manifest by grief, like a listing building that had sunk deeper in the muck.

In the weeks following her brother's death, when the air was thick with sadness and empty of activity, Miranda watched how her parents drifted by each other without touching or making eye contact, two magnets with opposite polarities. She noticed the liver spots and raised veins on her father's hands as he poured coffee or shook out a paper. The way his eyebrows furrowed together when he looked at his wife, and the way his cheeks sagged when he looked at a photo of his son. She noticed the way her father waddled, stiff in the hips, swinging rather than lifting his legs. She found herself tallying how many times her father cleared his throat with irritation as her mother poured herself another drink.

When Dix was around, he provided a welcome counterpoint to these observations. She'd note the way he strode forward, bent slightly in the middle as if he was trying to get ahead of himself, how many apples he ate along with his sandwich and thermos of coffee in the middle of the day. She'd register whether he'd washed his pants or whether they still held yesterday's dirt. She began to admire the calluses and scarred digits on his hands when he passed her a cardboard box with a dozen irregular, multicolored eggs from his neighbor's chickens.

The days after her brother's death were unusually hot and dry for early summer. Her parents, who were often testy with each other in even the best of circumstances, were as brittle and crackling as the weather itself. Normally, her brother would be here to break the tension between them with a joke, a tease, or simply with the sudden influx of coltish energy that surrounded him when he arrived for the weekend with several of his pals, cases of beer, and a cooler of lobsters. His friends were a blur of boat shoes and web belts, button-downs and mops of hair. More than boys, but not quite men. They all introduced themselves with hearty handshakes and names that could be first or last—Tucker, Parker, Brooks, Hunter, Graham—but these were rarely used. Nicknames coded to some past misadventure that hinted of involvement with a drink or a girl

were more common. These friends of her brother were three, four, and five years older—an eternity to a teenage girl—and seemed to regard her with friendly indulgence, as if she were the family dog. They'd whack a birdie or croquet ball her way as an invitation, a challenge, really, to come join them at whatever lawn game they were up to.

As Miranda recalled these weekends of summers past, so different from those of the summer in front of her, one of her brother's friends came to her memory whole and apart, not merely another in the usual crowd of tumbling testosterone. The man's name was David. She remembered because it was so plain. That particular weekend, she was still in the shower when everyone arrived, so had missed the introductions. She had put on freshly laundered jeans and a floral shirt made of corduroy to offset its otherwise obvious femininity. She had given her lashes a light coating of mascara. She had not wanted to appear as if she had dressed for them or because of them but wanted deeply, almost desperately, to be thought well of, to be seen as pretty by her brother's friends and by her brother himself, thinking, hoping this would make him proud of her. She had so little else to offer. She had wandered out to the deck, wanting to enter the party already in progress on the lawn from an oblique angle where she could observe them for a few moments without being seen herself. She was surprised to find a young man already there, sitting on the deck she had expected to be unoccupied. The sight of him startled her, and she bumped into a lounge chair. He looked up and stared at her, unblinking. She stared back, questioning. He gestured with his chin toward his foot, encased in a soft cast she hadn't noticed.

“Small mishap,” he said, grinning. “Took a bit of a spill on my way out of one of Gotham's finest drinking establishments.”

Miranda had just read *The Great Gatsby* in school. The young man seemed to have stepped right from the pages of that book.

“My name is David. You must be Miranda, the adorable younger sister I’ve heard so much about. Come,” he said, indicating a chair. “Keep me company and help me cheer on the competitors at their noble sport.”

She sat where he had pointed. David offered a comical and inflated commentary on their badminton game. He seemed to be entertaining himself as much as, if not more than, her. Miranda had little experience with flirtation. She was caught off guard, and then simply caught, by his manner. Most of his jokes were lost on her, but that didn’t seem to matter. He occasionally broke through the performance with a direct question. What was her favorite subject? Earth science. How old was she? Seventeen. Was she planning on college? A consenting shrug. Did she have a boyfriend? An embarrassed head shake. Did she still play with dolls? She froze on this question, suspecting she was being made fun of. He stared at her, his icy blue eyes challenging her to parry. She remained silent, and a shout from the players over a bold return on a smash eventually drew his unsettling gaze back to the game.

Looking back, it seemed he was there only that one time. When Miranda met him again years later, it took her some time to place him, to remember the few moments they’d had in the summer sunshine on her parents’ deck. Of course by then he had a different name, a different look, and she encountered him in a totally different context. It would take another teasing remark, that same smirking expression in his eyes, the similar seductive pull, for her to remember where she’d first met him.

Her brother took David away from her that day, off to town for a beer and game of pool. Her brother. Steven Prescott Steward. She always thought of him that way because that was how he introduced himself. But call me Scott, he’d always add, one hand out to shake, the other reaching forward to clap a shoulder, his teeth brilliant white against his peach lips, his eyes the shade of a

spring sky, his hair streaked with the tones of honey and maple syrup, a heavy fringe forever falling in his face, enough years older than she was—a senior when she was a freshman, always on his way out when she was on her way in—to be tantalizingly close to a peer, but still just beyond reach. He was one who pumped hands, slapped men on the back, threw children in the air, squeezed women to his side, and told old ladies they were beautiful. He was a fantasy son come true. It wasn't until after his sudden death, the image of that mangled car branded in her mind, that Miranda wondered if he really was a perfect son, or if it had all been role-play; and if so, had he ever tired of the performance? She began to suspect that following the script of how to be the ideal firstborn probably made everything easier, because then you knew just what to do to be what others wanted you to be. And you were always guaranteed a positive reaction.

Miranda felt as if she was the complete opposite, fumbling through life, all thumbs. She was no good at cocktail-party chatter. She was best in a sincere one-on-one conversation. Or even better, alone with a book in her hand or surrounded by woods. She had none of Scott's charms, nor did she wish for them. But she missed them. She missed how his presence in a room allowed her to relax because he took up all the air, space, attention. He was supposed to be here, still. He was supposed to be getting ready to return to law school. He was supposed to lend balance: a father and a mother, a boy and a girl. Without him, everything was off-kilter. Without his smooth and slick veneer, the raw rot at the core of their family was exposed.

She went back to her job at the CSA farm as an excuse to get away from the desiccated feeling in the house. There were more hours to be had there in the summer season. Kneeling on the dry ground, clods of dirt in her hands and under her fingernails, salty sweat dripping from her brow, helped settle something in her that fluttered constantly and erratically when she was at

home. Her father started to go golfing again, but Miranda suspected he really just went and hung out at the club. Her mother did not start anything again.

Miranda watched what was and was not happening around her and wondered what to do. She tried looking forward, but saw only a dark road with a sharp curve that obscured her view of what might be coming. So she waited for something to happen, for something to break the spell they were all under.

Her mother said, "Leave it alone, Chick."

Her father said, "Shut up, Bunny."

Her mother set her teeth, silently pushed herself up from the sofa, and moved to the sideboard. She began very methodically using silver tongs to pick up ice cubes from the matching silver bucket and drop them into her just-emptied glass. How many times had Miranda's mother told her the bucket and tongs had been passed down from her grandmother? She didn't even bother with that, anymore. Miranda winced at each small clatter of ice against glass. Her father was at the back door, sitting on a bench, jamming his feet into tall Bean boots. Strong gusts of wind rattled the windows. Rain pelted down so hard it sounded like someone was throwing fistfuls of rocks at the house.

"Let Dix take care of it tomorrow, Chick," her mother said as she unscrewed the cap from the gin bottle.

"Shut up, Bunny," her father repeated. "Have another drink and let me take care of this."

He snugged his laces tight with a savage tug.

Miranda stood at the kitchen counter, her heart squirreling around in her chest, looking from one parent to the other. Her father stood, shoved his arms through the sleeves of his jacket, and

clamped a hat on his head. He yanked the door open. Rain blew in. Miranda watched the drops sparkle as the lamplight touched them for a moment before they were absorbed into the worn area of wood by the back door.

Dix was going to fix that spot, she thought.

He was coming by next week to revarnish the mudroom floor. Then the drops would just sit there, waiting to evaporate or be wiped away.

The door slammed. It was late August. Heat, humidity, and thunderstorms had filled the month. Her mother opened a bottle of tonic water. It hissed in the quiet her father had left behind. The two women looked at each other, and her mother nodded, once, silently agreeing to an unspoken solution. The usual solution. The only solution. Miranda stepped to the phone and tapped in the numbers. It always took him a long, reluctant time to answer.

“Lo,” he said.

“Hi. It’s Miranda. Sorry to call in the storm. It’s late, I know. Such a crazy storm,” she chattered nervously. “There’s a tree out there, the big one by the garage, making a bad sound. I don’t know, some kind of a groan, and Dad’s gone out to give it a look. Afraid it’s going to come down on the roof, damage something.”

“If it comes down, it comes down,” Dix said, his voice a low, comforting rumble. “Not much he can do about it right now. Nothing I can do about it, either.”

“Other than talk some sense into him,” Miranda said. “Mother’s afraid he’ll get hurt.”

Dix didn’t respond.

“You know how he is, Dix,” Miranda said quietly.

“I was on my way out anyway,” Dix replied.

Miranda doubted this was true, but appreciated the lie.

“Gotta go check on the Rawlings’ place. I’ll swing by.”

“Thank you, Dix. Thank you so much.”

Miranda and her mother sat side by side on the sofa, in silence, listening to the storm. It sounded like a madman trying to break into the house. Her mother sipped. Miranda fidgeted, picking at a hangnail. She imagined her father glaring at the offending tree, as if his stare alone could bring it into compliance. She hoped he’d just gone out to the workshop. He had a lounge chair out there. A few books and magazines. A bottle of bourbon. Sometimes he used the excuse of some sort of an outdoors project to get out of the house and went there instead. Miranda was afraid to go look, to check up on him. That would make him mad. So she and her mother waited for Dix to come and fix things. That was what he did. That was what they, and many others, counted on him for.

The gusts and slaps of wind were punctuated by cracks of thunder and flashes of lightning. The distance between light and sound shortened. Miranda counted the seconds. She got to three and then, thankfully, the interval began to lengthen again. There was a lull in the nerve-racking noise. Miranda held her breath. A new sound began. A low moan at first, it rose into a violent crescendo of pops and tears, which ended with a shuddering crash that shook the ground beneath the house. This was followed by a vacuum of silence. The sounds of the storm filtered in again, much more distant, the gaps between thunder and lightning greater and greater as the chaos moved away.

Miranda and her mother stared straight ahead and waited. Before long, there was the crunch of truck tires on gravel. They relaxed. Soon enough, they knew the door would open and the men would come in, stamping off the rain and discussing the next day’s projects. Which would now include cutting up the fallen tree or branch or whatever it was that had broken free. Her father

would insist Dix stay for a cup of coffee. Dix would politely decline, saying he had to get over to some other house, some other project, some other problem. But his presence, however brief, would restore her father's mood; he was not fond of the company of women.

They both counted the minutes. In fewer than expected, the door swung open, banging rudely against the wall. Stamp, stamp. Two boots. No voices. Miranda stood. Dix strode into the room and met her eyes.

“Call 911,” he said.