

THE LAST OF HER

A NOVEL

BRENT SPENCER

NIGHTHORSE

ALSO BY BRENT SPENCER

The Lost Son

Are We Not Men?

Rattlesnake Daddy

© 2021 Brent Spencer. All rights reserved.

Cover Art © 2021 iStock.com/studiogstock

ISBN: 978-1-944467-33-3 (ebook)

ISBN: 978-1-944467-38-8 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-1-944467-39-5 (audiobook)

Nighthorse is an imprint of Brighthorse Books and is dedicated to the publication of crime fiction. At this time, manuscripts are considered by invitation only.

Permission to quote limited excerpts from this book is granted to reviewers and book bloggers. Permission to scan, upload, and distribute this book is limited to Brighthorse Books. For permission to reproduce longer selections from this book, contact the editors at info@brighthorsebooks.com. For information about Brighthorse Books, visit us on the web at brighthorsebooks.com.

This book is a work of fiction. Any names, characters, companies, organizations, places, events, locales, and incidents are either used in a fictitious manner or are fictional. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, actual companies or organizations, or actual events is purely coincidental.

A percentage of the profits from the sale of this book will be donated to Grace After Fire, a non-profit dedicated to the empowerment of the woman veteran.

Please let the author and others know what you think of this novel by leaving a review on [your favorite book retailer's online space](#) and/or on social media. To receive a free copy of the first chapter of the sequel to this novel and to hear about crime fiction favorites and participate in book giveaways, please join the mailing list by clicking this link to [Bookfunnel](#). Your email will never be shared with or sold to anyone else.

OGALLALA, NEBRASKA

1

AFTER TWO AND A HALF DAYS, the bus finally limped into Ogallala, trundling to a wheezing stop under the canopy of a motel that doubled as the small town's bus station.

The driver's barely decipherable voice came over the speaker. "Ogallala, Nebraska. Ogallala, Nebraska. If this is your final destination, you have yourself a blessed day. If you're going on to Denver, be back on the bus in thirty. Leaving for Denver in thirty minutes. With you or without you."

Halfway back, on the left, a heavyset older woman said, to no one in particular, "'Ogallala, Nebraska.' Sounds like somebody trying to cough up a hairball."

Hella Duran tossed her a smile from across the aisle and went back to giving the top of her right thigh a vigorous rubdown. Had to get the blood flowing, even though bringing bomb leg back to life probably meant bringing the pain back to life, too. She'd walked all the way back from Torkham, Afghanistan. Seemed like it, anyway. Had it helped? Hard to tell. The pain was coming at her like a distant siren.

Most of the other passengers were unfolding themselves from their seats, grabbing down their bags, and crowding into the aisle. Hella stood slowly, pulling herself up by the seatback

in front of her. The stern-faced woman in that seat turned to give her a sour look. Then her eyes went wide and her head whipped back to the front.

What she saw first, probably, was Hella's self-inflicted haircut, her shaggy, lopsided thatch of black. She cut it by feel, using the combat knife she kept in her booth sheath. Had cut it that way ever since she'd enlisted. Did it mean she sometimes came close to slicing off an ear? Yes. Did it make her stop? No. She didn't care how she looked. She was a soldier. All she needed to do was keep it out of her eyes.

But then she realized she was no longer a soldier, no longer anything that mattered.

The main thing the woman in front of her probably noticed was her sideswiped face, her left cheek streaked with still-fresh scars. Hella had to admit she was a sight. Wait 'til the woman got a load of her in motion. Bomb leg was more a charred piece of lumber than a leg. Monster. Probably what the woman would think. A black T-shirt, black jeans, and desert kicks completed Hella's look. But to most people, the details didn't matter. It was simple. She looked like five pounds of trouble in a three-pound bag.

Ogallala is on the southern edge of the Sandhills, the prairie dunes that roll across a quarter of the state, which, until 1862, had been considered uninhabitable wasteland. To Hella, it was home. Not Ogallala. Her home, Sentinel, is a couple of hours north of there, in the gritty heart of the Sandhills. Actually, her grandfather's ranch is a couple of corrugated miles north of that. Not the end of the Earth, as some wag said, but you can see it from there.

In the aisle now, she pulled down her fully stuffed ALICE pack and ACU jacket from the bin above her seat and pulled the light jacket on. A shirt, really. "Blouse," the Army called it. She could feel the day's heat building up, but she felt safer wearing it. Maybe because her roll of cash, the last of her active duty pay,

was fastened securely in the chest pocket. Maybe because its Universal Camouflage Pattern made her feel invisible wherever she went. Or maybe it was just habit.

As she hitch-stepped up the aisle, she hauled the Alice pack by the paracord grab handle she'd knotted in Basic, back when the war was all before her.

The pain now was worse than anything she'd gone through in The Sand Trap, what Captain Rankin called Afghanistan, the place of their deployment. Definition: an artificial hazard on a golf course consisting of a depression containing sand. So, yeah. That about covered it. Especially the *artificial* part. And *depression*.

At the front of the bus, she thanked the driver and stepped down, blinking in the hard glare of sunlight.

Only morning and the day already flat-top fried from side-to-side.

Nebraska.

It turned out the connecting bus to Sentinel wouldn't leave until late afternoon. And then she'd have to find a city bus the rest of the way. She'd grown up just north of Sentinel, in the small incorporated village of Clark. Not even a village, according to the maps, but a *census-designated place*. No one but a local still called it Clark. Everyone in Sentinel knew it as The Bottoms because it was the lowest ground in the area and prone to flooding when The Niobrara felt like a stretch. This gave some people permission to think of those who lived there as poor, as losers, as trash. They said it with a sneer: *She's from The Bottoms!*

Her grandfather, Ham, had a butcher shop in Clark, but his ranch was north of that. If she could get to the shop, he'd take her the rest of the way home. Or she could hitch the whole way, but the idea of standing with a cocked thumb next to a searing strip of asphalt was too depressing. And who'd pick up a monster? Or...

She dug into her jacket pocket for the rest of her change. Ham would be well into the day's work at his butcher shop by now. Even so, he'd come get her, wouldn't he? Save her from a five-hour wait and a two-hour bus ride? She hadn't warned him or her mother that she was coming, but he'd drive down for her, right? She closed her hand over her change and stood there until the coins went greasy, then shoved them back into the front pocket of her black jeans. What was she thinking? She knew better than this. She didn't want to hear his *no* or, worse, the silence that might open up between them. Besides, he shouldn't be away from her mother for that long, Sophie, who'd been in a long slow spiral for years.

Across the motel's parking lot, at the open hatch of a red compact near the exit ramp, stood a small woman wearing a salmon-colored tunic over loose white linen pants. Clothes you might wear to a garden party. Not many gardens or parties in the Sandhills. Unless you counted a backyard barbecue. Whatever grew in the Sandhills was tough as a weed and looked like it. Even the people. So, definitely an out-of-towner.

She was trying to lift a boxy black canvas duffel into the cargo area of a red compact. The car looked like a cross between a gummy bear and a blood drop. As she lifted, or tried to lift, the bag, she talked into a glittering pink cell phone clamped between her left shoulder and cheek. The woman had long mahogany hair, one side longer than the other, half-curtaining her face. Wasn't there some old movie star who wore her hair like that but blonde? She couldn't remember the name, only that she was his grandfather's favorite.

As Hella stepped up to her, the woman smiled and finished her call with "Yes, sir. I'm guessing about two hours." She had managed to lift one end of the bag onto the lip of the cargo area and was leaning against it, clamping it half in and half out of the car. She jabbed at the phone's face to finish the call, but her pink nails were so long and the phone was so crusty with fake pink

jewels that Hella couldn't see how she was able to *find* the END CALL button, let alone tap it with a fingertip.

"Here," Hella said, "let me help." She grabbed a handful of canvas at each end and lifted the whole thing easily inside. The black canvas reminded her of a gun bag. Heavy as one, too.

"Thanks," the woman said, her gaze gliding over Hella's scarred left cheek. "You're my hero."

"No problem. Listen, you mind if I ask are you going north?"

The woman gave her a wondering look and smiled. "Need a ride?"

"I do."

She snapped the trunk shut, said, "Hop in," and headed for the driver's door.

This was going to be easier than Hella thought. She popped the passenger door, slid the seat back, and climbed in, setting her ruck on the floor in front of her. The woman had eaten a fast-food breakfast not long before. The smell of it still hung in the air, like death. She tried to ignore it.

The woman, behind the wheel now, started the engine, set the air conditioning on high, flicked back each wing of hennaed hair, and thrust her open right hand across the center console. "Name's Noone, Amanda Noone."

Hella was still so fresh from the fight that her first impulse had been to salute the woman. Instead, she shook her hand. "Hella Duran."

"*Hella?*" the woman said. "Cool name." She cranked the rearview mirror so she could see herself, made a mouth. "We'll get going in a minute. I need to fix my face." She reached to the back seat and hauled up a purse the same salmon-color as her tunic and as big as a horse's feed bag. Then she started pawing through it. "Now where'd I put my lipstick?"

HELLA. It was the only name she answered to. She'd been given the name one day during her vacation in the Ozarks, at Fort Leonard Wood. Boot camp. She and the other recruits had just finished small arms training, releasing the magazines on their M9s and racking the slides, ejecting the chamber rounds, then locking the slides.

"Remember, people!" the master gunner had said. "You want a *click*, not a *boom*!"

She eyeballed the chamber of her M9, closed the action, and dropped the hammer. *Click*.

After holstering their nines, they scrambled downrange to retrieve their paper targets from the hay bales. Except for Hella, who headed back to the formation area.

"Hey, look!" a private called out, holding up his target. "I put one in Osama's chin!" He had a tight vee of a smile that bunched up his knobby cheeks in delight. His name was Monroe, she remembered, but the other guys called him "TR."

Without a glance at him, the soldier in the next lane said, "And all the rest into the hay bales behind him."

"Yeah?" Monroe said, turning to watch Hella leave the range.

“Well, looks like some people shot so bad they’re not even collecting their paper!”

He pulled her target. A single hole in the target’s forehead and one in the center of the chest.

Only two holes.

Except the chest hole was four inches in diameter. She’d shot out the center ring of the target as if she’d hit it with an RPG round.

“Holy crap!” Monroe said as he brought her target to the sergeant. “She’s one lucky b—”

“Recruit!” the master gunner called out. Hella froze. Somehow she knew he wasn’t talking to Monroe. “Yes, Master Gunner?”

He had a lean, lined face and thoughtful eyes. He held her target wide, inspecting it for stray holes, found none, said, “From now on you clear your own target.”

“Yes, Master Gunner.” She took a step, his voice stopping her again.

“And unless you want us to call you ‘Center-Ring Sally’ from now on, you’re going to have to tell us what they call you.”

She turned to him now. “Sir?”

“Your nickname. What you go by.”

She muttered, “They mostly call me ‘Helen,’ Master Gunner,” though her mother and grandfather called her *Helai* and some of the guys at school had called her *The Girl*, *Sugar Tits*, and sometimes *Hey, Bitch*.

“Helen?” the man said. “*Helen* will not do, recruit. No *Helen* ever shot the shit out of a ten-ring like this. From now on you’ll be known as *Hella*. As in ‘This is *hella* fine shooting.’ We clear?”

The name came to her like a lost dog finding its way home. It felt as though she’d never had another name.

“I say again,” the master gunner said, “are we clear?”

“*Clear*, Master Gunner.”

“Where’d you learn to shoot like this anyway?”

“My grandpa, sir.”

The sergeant nodded and pursed his thin lips. He’d seen it before. “Ex-military.”

“No, sir. Mean Nebraska rancher.”

OK, not what he’d expected. “Well, he was a good teacher.”

And now she couldn’t stop talking. “Ham isn’t so much a *teacher* as a *threatener*. In summer, he doesn’t let me come in to supper until I shoot all the snakes off the bushes. Where I live, they like to climb up there and sun themselves. Paper target’s got nothing on an angry massasauga, Master Gunner.”

“A what?”

“Prairie rattler, sir.”

“Where in God’s big greenie are you from, recruit?”

“The Sandhills, sir.”

“The *where*?”

“The moon, sir.”

She floated for the rest of the day. She had a name. The only name she’d ever truly felt was hers. And she’d earned it. Later, walking across the compound, she’d passed Monroe, the knobby-faced private from the shooting range. He called out to her, the first to use her new name: “Hey, Hella! How ’bout a little horizontal R&R?”

She ignored him, kept walking. He was only messing with her. Chin music. No big thing.

But then he came up behind her and spun her by the shoulder. Monroe was a thin guy with a pale, papery face. He growled, “I’m talking to you, breech bunny.” His gray lips bent into a vee as he grabbed a breast in each hand. “Now ain’t this some kind of fun?”

Hella couldn’t believe it. Had he slept through both gunnery *and* hand-to-hand combat training? She grabbed one of his biceps in each hand, planting a thumb at the base of each, then pressed. Hard. With a sharp insuck of air, he dropped to his knees. She kept pressing, rolling him onto his back, his breath

gone now, his eyes filled with tears, a choking cry in his throat. Only then did she let go, but not before lecturing him. “Victory through skills, man! Don’t forget!”

As she walked away, he yelled, “What are you, some kind of dyke?”

Without looking back, she sang out, “To you, I am!”

It was the last problem she had with him, in fact the last problem any woman in their platoon had with any of the men, though it’s true the men had all decided, “Boys, we’re serving with a bunch of rug munchers!” Let them think that. Maybe now they wouldn’t try to pass the female recruits around like a bowl of nachos.

No biggie, she decided. From early on, she’d come to believe that men were minuses in the brain department. What was that little rattle inside a man’s skull? A tiny stale peanut wobbling on the head of a pin. Just like high school. Back then, in the twisted logic of the peanut brain, she was a slut because she wouldn’t put out, wouldn’t, in fact, become the slut she was accused of being.

3

THE CAR'S DRIVER, this Noone person, finally finished her makeup, finger-combed the side-wings of her hair, and looked down at the ruck in front of Hella's legs. "You know," she said, "you can toss your bag in back."

"No thanks." Hella patted the top of the ruck. "Nothing comes between me and my ALICE." All those deployments had taught her to secure her gear. Even with the ruck taking up all that space, the seat felt roomy after almost three days on the bus.

"So where you headed?" Noone asked.

"Sentinel," Hella said. "Actually, just north of that. How about you?"

"Where'm I headed?" The woman thought a second. "Alliance," she said.

Sentinel wasn't exactly on the way to Alliance. "Drop me at Hyannis. I'll get the rest of the way on my own." *Somehow*, she thought.

"Nah." Noone started the car. "I'll take you the whole way."

"Are you sure? It's to heck and gone out of your way."

Noone backed the car out of the space, then spun the wheel on the heel of her hand. "No prob."

“Well, let me pay for the gas.”

“Company’s paying.” She stopped the car at the mouth of the parking lot, checking left and right for the nearly non-existent traffic, checking out Hella again, too, with a quick, strafing glance. “Just entertain me. That’ll be payment enough.”

“I’m not much of a talker,” Hella said.

Noone pulled onto the highway behind a battered white pickup, heading north on 61. “Well, that’s a pity. Because the minute you bore me, I’ll put you out like a sack of smelly garbage.”

Hella sank into herself a little. “Maybe this is a bad idea.” *Another in a long line*, she thought.

Noone laughed nervously. “Just kidding.”

To herself, and quietly, Hella said, “I’m not very good at this.”

The driver shot her another quick, appraising look as she passed the pickup. “Humor?” she asked.

“People,” Hella said.

Then, as if to change the subject, Noone said, “You serve, I take it?”

What gave me away? The camo jacket? The ALICE pack? The desert kicks? She was supposed to turn all of it in at discharge, but Captain Rankin had made them write their names, blood types, and battle roster on them. This meant the Army couldn’t reissue them, so she had to buy them. Expensive but she was glad to have them.

Or was it my slit-eyed desert stare that gave me away?

“Not serve,” she said. “Served. In the Army.”

She thought of her captain again. The man who’d made her what she was, a CI agent who passed herself off as a street beggar. A street *walker*, according to some of the guys at Monster. Captain Rankin had given her the opportunity of a lifetime, and somehow, in a way she still didn’t understand, she’d thrown it all away.

“Looks like you saw some action,” Noone said, “if you don’t mind me saying.”

The face. The limp. Of course. “This?” Hella said, flicking a few fingers at the scars streaking her left cheek. “This is just all that’s left of my front-line facial.”

“Ah! *There’s* your sense of humor!” Noone laughed, then caught herself. “I don’t mean to joke about it. Must’ve been terrible.”

Hella said nothing, just watched as the small town scrolled past them on either side. First shops, restaurants, grocery stores, and then the stiff white houses that always seemed braced for winter even in the height of summer. Then a couple of shabby motels, a massive truck stop. And then they left the town behind as they turned right onto 61, to the east a field of stubby corn watered by the machine gun hiss of central pivot irrigation. But no amount of water would make corn grow out here.

She looked west, the suddenness of Lake McConaughy taking her breath away. All that water. The wide, white beaches. The trees—the interlocked arms of cottonwoods; ponderosa pine, the best tree for building a shelterbelt; and every kind of maple—the last trees they’d see as they headed into the nineteen thousand square miles of The Sandhills.

They were hardly past the lake when the green of the grass faded to gray-green. Then they were gliding through an endless rumple of sand dunes covered with prairie grass—brushy wands of smooth brome, clutches of arrow-like Indiangrass, and waves of bluestem—big, bushy, and little. The whole belly of the state was ribbed with grassy dunes that, from the air, must have looked like old corduroy.

This was The Sandhills. This was home.

Back in the nineteenth century, the men who’d built the railroad across Nebraska had brought cattle with them for food. When the railroad was finished, they left them on the dunes to

die. But when they came back a year later, there was the herd, thriving, fattened up on prairie grass. Who knew? That and the railroad brought the settlers, and yet, even after all these years, The Sandhills was still a place where some counties had no more than one resident, where the postmaster might beg a customer to take someone else's mail to the only other resident in the county.

Hella startled when Noone said, "Anyway, thank you for your service."

Hella was barely out of the service, but she was already sick of the knee-jerk line. What did it even mean? *Was it you who asked me to go over there and get the holy crap blown out of me? No? Then what right have you got to thank me?* Without turning to Noone, Hella said only, "Don't mention it." *Seriously, do not mention it.* Besides, leaving the Army hadn't been her idea. Not her idea at all.

And really—*Noone? Amanda Noone?* What kind of name was that? It sounded as fake as the old movie star's name, the one with the hair, whoever that was. A brass-plated blond, she remembered, but that's all she remembered. Pretty sure, though, that the movie star didn't have these inch-long pink nails or a cell phone scaly with plastic gems.

Noone drove well, though, despite the nails. Hella had to give her that. From the look of it, she probably spent many hours on the road. The cup holders between them were stuffed with folded and rolled-up papers, mostly receipts and several small curled-up pocket-sized notepads. The dashboard had stacks of opened and unopened mail and folders that kept trying to slide into both their laps. The visor over the steering wheel was stuffed with a rubber-banded roll of paper. That and the boxy black garage remote clipped to the edge weighed the visor down so much that it kept dropping to block her vision and had to be pushed back up at regular intervals.

“My job keeps me on the road a lot,” Noone said. “I sort of live in the car sometimes. Most of the time, actually.”

“No problem.” But it did bother her. Until now, she hadn’t realized how much she was used to the military’s standard of order and cleanliness. She wondered what Noone would make of her rucksack packed, re-packed, and re-re-packed the Army way. Socks, skivvies, shirts, poncho, and pants Ranger-rolled. Bigger items rolled and tied, heavy ones at the bottom, the E-tool, the entrenching tool with its one serrated edge, in its pouch on the side. An E-tool? What did she need with a shovel in her new life?

To make conversation, Hella said, “You seem to know your way around this neck of the woods.”

“GPS,” she said, passing a semi on the right. There was no readout on her dash, but her bejeweled cell phone was suctioned there, its red light on. Must’ve been tracking her route with that. These days, it seemed, phones could do anything: plot out a driving route, play your favorite tunes, target a terrorist. Only sometimes the phone’s GPS took you to the wrong destination. Had her sat phone done that? Aimed the rock at Akhtar’s house and not bin Laden’s? Maybe it was no one’s fault. Maybe it was a glitch in the technology. But why hadn’t that possibility come up at the hearing? And why hadn’t *she* brought it up? No, she’d just sat there and let the system roll her flat.

To shake off the thought, she said, “What line are you in?” *What line are you in? Who are you, Willie Freaking Loman? Will you never learn how to talk to people?*

“I’m in...communications,” Noone said.

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Simple,” Noone said, tossing her a smile. “The equipment’s always breaking down, and men who don’t know anything make all the big decisions.”

“Sounds like the Army.”

Noone laughed, taking her hands off the wheel long enough

for a quick clap and pointing both index fingers at Hella. “*There you go!*” After grabbing the wheel again, she said, “So, did you always want to be a soldier?”

“No. No, I didn’t.” She turned back to the window, to the green fields whipping past, too tired, suddenly, to talk.

IT WAS A SEPTEMBER MORNING, nine years earlier, in 2001. Hella was eighteen. Had she ever really been that young? This was before she became Hella. Her birth name was Helai. So technically, though her grandfather had changed the family name years before she was born, she was Helai Durani, now Helai Duran. But no one at school ever quite heard her first name, so her teachers called her everything from Helen to Elaine to, sometimes, Eli. Easier to let everyone think her name was Helen. Better than being called by a dude's name.

She'd graduated from high school a few months ago, but she hadn't bothered to apply to colleges. Now, early on a Tuesday, her grandfather paced around the kitchen table, lecturing her. "A college education," he said, stopping behind her chair, "is the key to your future!" But he was wrong. College, she knew, was a car full of cool kids driving away fast. And that was fine. She'd happily spend her life traipsing back and forth between her two jobs—from Mr. Owens's feed store to her grandfather's butcher shop. The work tired her out—hauling sacks of feed, manhandling sides of beef. Still, she liked it. But her grandfather insisted.

So, after he left for the butcher shop at 7:30, she dragged

Ham's TV table to the living room window, plopped her crack-screened laptop onto it, and sat down to apply to colleges. But mostly she just gazed out the window. College, she knew, was hopeless. It was September already. Way too late. And no one would want her. Why didn't Ham realize that? But once he drew a line in the sand, not even the wind would cross it. So here she was, trying to persuade some college how special she was.

She looked down at the blinking cursor, nothing on the blank screen but a crack like a spider's web.

You just have to face it, her inner voice told her. The fact is that nothing—not one thing in this wide wooly world—makes you special.

Her mother was as American as a punch in the eye. Her father—well—erase, erase. When she was a kid, all she knew was that her grandfather was from somewhere far away, a place he didn't talk about. One day she'd asked him, "Baba, what country are you from?"

"Nebraska," he said proudly.

"But no, I mean where were you born?"

He gave her a long look, then said, "Let's say I was born in the country of Baalaa."

She gave him a sly smile. "Is that even a real country?"

"It is a country in my heart with its own customs, its own language. Shall I teach you?"

He taught her a language he made up to go with his mythical country. Before long, they spoke it all the time—calling out across the butcher shop to each other, the words rolling from the middle of her tongue back into her throat. So much richer and rounder than English, which made it sound as though a mouse was living in your nose. After speaking Baalaan for a while, her whole face hurt. Even her belly. Years passed before she knew the truth, that he was from Afghanistan, that he'd been teaching her Pashto.

But what did any of that have to do with her college essay? The blinking cursor was as insistent as a ringing phone. Only

one way to fix that. She snapped the lid shut, feeling a strange mixture of relief and regret. Well, she'd tried.

They were both at work—her grandfather at his butcher shop, her mother clerking at the feed store. She decided to clean the house, a much better use of her time. First she made the beds. Then she worked on the dishes, running the sink full of hot sudsy water. She had most of them done, gazing out the window over the sink at the sewage lagoon in the pasture. She and her grandfather had dug it with rented digging machines. Learning how to operate the big machines was fun, moving all that dirt. She missed it. But soon something else caught her eye.

She'd been trying to finish washing a glass. For some reason, it didn't seem to want to come clean, though when she looked at it, she saw nothing but a heavy fake-crystal thing with a pressed-in diamond-pattern all around and no milk lacquering the bottom. Still, she dunked it again, washed it again. And again.

Or maybe it wasn't the glass. Maybe it was the reflection of the portable TV screen in the kitchen window.

The screen—the world—was full of falling towers, crumbling over and over in slow-motion instant replay.

Because it was a Tuesday morning in early September, 2001.

She washed the glass again. She looked at the reflection of the TV screen, afraid to turn and look at it directly, telling herself it was probably only a movie. She washed the glass again. Looked at the reflection again. Washed it until the glass was cleaner than clean, until it broke apart in her hands, into thick chunks that somehow didn't cut her. She drained the sink, fished the pieces out, and threw them away. Then she dried the dishes in the rack. Once. Twice. She put them away. She wiped out the sink. Wiped it again. She looked at the reflection and looked at the reflection.

Then she wrote a note to her mother and grandfather, left the house, and hitched a ride to the Army recruiting station in Scottsbluff.

NOONE HAD BEEN TALKING, but Hella'd only caught the tail end of it. She said, "I said, 'How long were you in for?'"

"Signed up on 9/11. Like a lot of folks."

"Right," Noone said. "The hero runs *toward* trouble."

The hero and the idiot, Hella thought. "I'm no hero. It's just somebody had to do something."

"And did you? Do something?"

Did I do something? People died. Some of the right ones. Too many of the wrong ones. She said, "I don't know. I got blowed up."

"You paid a heavy price for preserving our freedom."

"Is that what you call it?" Hella turned away again. She smelled them before she saw them, a vast herd of big, square-arsed Angus, a sea of cattle packed so densely she couldn't see the ground beneath their feet. The air was thick with the smell of fresh manure, a smell she'd become so used to that, for years, it felt as though something was missing whenever she didn't smell it. Looking at the herd, it was possible to believe what everyone said—that Nebraska had more cattle than people, way more in The Sandhills. The Angus were nowhere near as pretty as her grandfather's herd of Charolais—big, buff-colored, like a cross between a Haflinger pony and a yellow lab.

The woman said, “You don’t think that’s what we’re doing over there—preserving freedom?”

She hated that kind of talk. “That’s a question for a politician. I’m just a grunt. *Was* a grunt. And anyway, what do I know? Mostly, I think it’s all just one big Charlie Foxtrot.”

“Excuse me?”

“Clusterfudge.”

“Fudge? You mean—”

“Yeah.” Hella nodded.

Noone said, “The Army didn’t roughen up your language at all?”

“Habit. My grandfather doesn’t like bad language.” Ham, her grandfather. Should she have called him? Warned him she was coming? Asked him to prepare Sophie, her mother? What was she thinking, just showing up like this? She didn’t think she could explain things over the phone. She needed to be face-to-face with her grandfather. And she needed a few weeks—longer, probably—in her old room, needed to touch base with her old life, to figure things out in a place where no one saw her as an object of suspicion or scorn or ridicule or pity.

She’d come home between deployments. Mostly. Sometimes. Her first visit home, just after Basic, she spent the whole time apologizing for not telling them she’d joined the Army. Her grandfather called her his “little warrior.” Her mother pulled a kitchen chair next to hers but said nothing, only rested her forehead against Hella’s upper arm, leaning against her hard. Her mother loved her, yes, she knew that. But it was hard to know sometimes whether a gesture like that came from love or mania. Like so much in life.

But the more time she stacked in the Army, the less home felt like a place that belonged to her. After a while, a visit home felt just like that—a visit. Her room was still there, with its twin bed and the dresser she’d painted pink when she was eight. The

Britney Spears poster she'd hung when she was twelve had begun to embarrass her from the moment she'd put it up but never enough to take it down. And she wouldn't take it down now.

Still, whatever it meant or didn't mean, she needed it. Home.

"What rank?" Noone said.

"I'm sorry?"

"What rank were you?"

Hella started to say a 35L, a counterintelligence agent, a *gray*, but stopped herself. "A private," she said.

"Just a private?" the woman said. "Not even a corporal?"

"Just a lowly private," she said. She'd had two chances over the years to take the stripes, but she'd said no both times. Corporal, she thought, was a meaningless rank. And she'd said no to sergeant because she had always been more loner than leader. It was only as a 35L that she could keep doing the work that mattered to her, the work that finally got her kicked. The full force of her new reality hit her like a wave. She'd been a 35L, a counterintelligence agent, a *gray*. Now she was a nothing.

"What's next for you?" the woman was asking.

What she wanted was to track down Bledsoe, the drone operator, pin him to a wall and squeeze the truth out of him, the truth about what had really happened that day. But she had no idea where he was or how to confront him, so she said, "Home, I guess." And as soon as she said it, she felt the pull of it. Home. That's all she needed, a great big slice of home.

She had to face it. Her life was over, the part that mattered. She'd go back to working at the feed store and Ham's butcher shop. Maybe that would be enough. But could she still haul fifty-pound sacks of grain for Mr. Owens? With bomb leg, probably not. Criminy, she probably couldn't even stand behind Ham's meat case for more than an hour at a time.

More prairie grass whipped past. Endless gray-green reaches

of it under a pale blue sky with clouds like torn cotton. She'd lost track of time, hypnotized by the rolling prairie, so hypnotized that, again, she didn't hear what the woman had said.

"I'm sorry?"

"I said, 'Almost there.'"

Hella brought the world into focus and realized they were on the outskirts of Sentinel. The rolling ridges of prairie grass allowed space for a few ranches, a feed lot, then a rust-skirted pole barn housing a sprawling tractor repair business, then a tidy white house tucked against a shelterbelt. Then a set of small glass-fronted stores, most looking abandoned, one looking lived-in. And then the downtown itself, a cluster of office buildings, an occasional strip mall. After that a small suburb, then an office park, and then, like an afterthought, the village of Clark, little more than a wide main street of ancient red brick shops and offices, all of them smaller and shabbier than she remembered. Some of the store windows were papered over with yellowing newsprint. One had a torn *Going-Out-of-Business* banner taped across the front window, though the business itself was not *going* but long gone. To the north, east, and west were rolling dunes covered with cattle. A little farther north was the Niobrara. A little farther than that was the South Dakota line and the Rosebud and Pine Ridge Reservations.

Noone said, "Good to be home, right?"

"Right." But now she wasn't so sure. With all that had happened to her, Hella would be lucky if her mother even recognized her. And who knew how much more of Sophie's mind had faded to gray? "Could you park up there, on the right?"

She directed the woman to park the compact in front of The Bristol, a double-wide diner a few doors short of Ham's butcher shop but on the other side of the street. She wanted a cup of coffee and a quiet think. She needed a little time to prepare herself before calling her grandfather, who could be unpredictable.

When she was eight, Ham bought a new livestock tank for watering his herd. A round tub of water-tight steel about the size of an overgrown wading pool. He could have tested it by filling it with the hose. Instead, he hauled it and them to the Niobrara, where she helped him lift it down from the bed of the pickup and haul it to the water's edge. She helped her mother high-step into the tank and didn't let go of her hand until she was sitting with her back against the side of the tank and her legs stretched out in front of her. Just as Hella was about to step into the tank, the old man slapped her face, then stepped in himself, turned, and held out his hand to help Hella in.

The slap had taken her breath away. Wiping at the hot tears, ignoring his hand, she wailed, "What was *that* for?"

"For misbehaving," he said, dropping the hand she ignored.

"But Grandpa," she said, "I didn't *do* anything!"

"For the thing you *think* to do," he explained in his broken English.

In that moment, a decision flashed through her mind. She would jump into the Niobrara, swim across. Heckfire, it was so shallow she could probably *wade* across. She'd find her way to a reservation. They'd take her in, raise her as their own. She had decided. She would do it. But then she saw her mother's gray face. Not a color so much as a blankness. The woman was about to go whirling down the river in a steel tub, but she sat there as bored as a bus passenger. How could she leave this woman? She stepped into the tank.

Her grandfather picked up the oar and pushed off the bank, sending them between the dunes that canyoned that part of the river.

The slap was all she ever remembered of their trip.

Noone was staring out over the steering wheel of her parked car. Again she'd said something Hella hadn't heard.

"I'm sorry?" Hella said. *Some entertainment*, she thought. *You should have put me out like that smelly sack of garbage.*

The woman turned to her with a tight smile, the side-wing of mahogany movie-star hair covering half her face. “Never mind. You sure you’ll be OK?”

Hella climbed out of the car into a day as bright as an interrogation. She said, “I’m home. What could go wrong?”