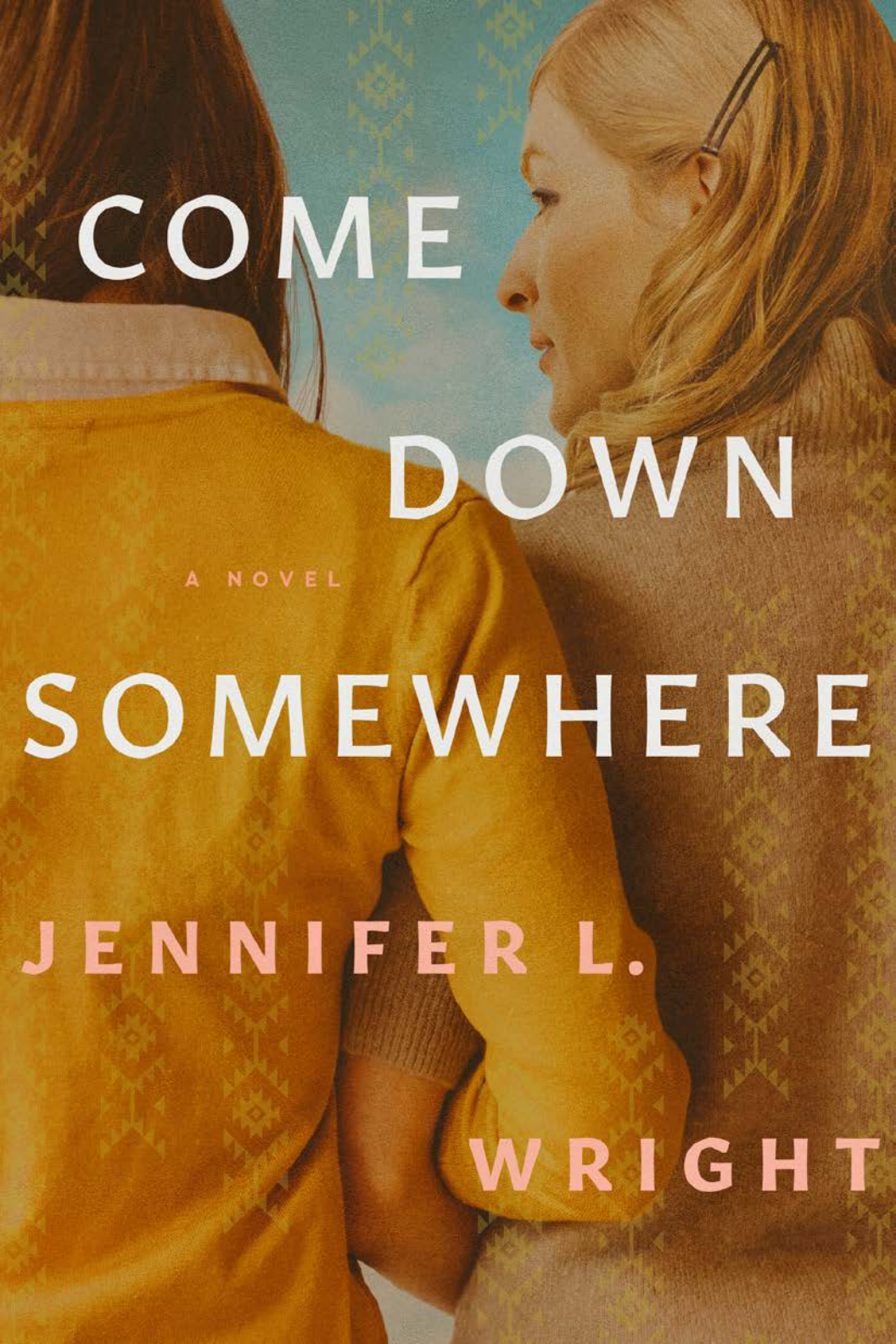




COME

DOWN

A NOVEL

SOMEWHERE

JENNIFER L.

WRIGHT

Praise for Jennifer L. Wright

“A fiercely woven tale from the birth of the atomic age, Jennifer Wright’s unflinching look at fractured friendship, war-tested families, and hard-won faith grabs the reader from its start and won’t let go. It’s a powerfully rendered testament of how the implements of war, in the end, must come down somewhere, even when our hearts struggle to hold the fallout that only God can redeem.”

PATRICIA RAYBON

award-winning author of *All That Is Secret* and *My First White Friend*

“Jennifer L. Wright is a storyteller with the distinct gift of bringing history to life in full color. I knew from the very first page of *Come Down Somewhere* that I was going to experience a powerhouse novel with deeply complex characters, an engaging and heartfelt story, and master level writing. Wright’s sophomore effort exceeded my expectations. Jo and Olive have taken up residence in my heart where I believe they will stay for a long time. This novel is a triumph.”

SUSIE FINKBEINER

author of *The Nature of Small Birds* and *Stories That Bind Us*

“An emotive novel, Jennifer L. Wright’s *Come Down Somewhere* takes readers to the deserts of New Mexico in 1945 where an unthinkable, top secret event took place. Wright’s command

of historical facts allows her to craft a fascinating tale that introduces us to Jo and Olive, two young women coming of age in dark and frightening times, revealing what life was like in the shadow of the Trinity nuclear bomb test. Their story serves as a powerful reminder that friendship is a precious gift worth fighting for, even when all seems lost.”

MICHELLE SHOCKLEE

author of *Under the Tulip Tree* and *Count the Nights by Stars*

“When it comes to writing haunting prose, Jennifer L. Wright positively shines, and her second novel is no exception. . . .

Unique, suspenseful, and meticulously researched, *Come Down Somewhere* is a raw and masterful exploration of estrangement in its many forms and one of the finest works of Christian fiction I’ve ever read.”

NAOMI STEPHENS

Carol Award–winning author of *Shadow among Sheaves*

“*Come Down Somewhere* is a heart-wrenching story of friendship, war on the home front, and all that threatens the deepest parts of our souls. The story touches on a lesser known part of WWII, of an atomic nature, and allows the reader to take a journey with Olive and Jo through an explosive friendship that will be tested by the fires of loyalty. A must-read of 2022—the fallout of this novel will stay with you long after you’ve finished it.”

JAIME JO WRIGHT

Christy Award–winning author of *The Souls of Lost Lake* and *The House on Foster Hill*

“Jenn L. Wright brings a devastating event in our nation’s history to light with a poignant story of friendship and faith. In a landscape fraught with heartbreak, *Come Down Somewhere* speaks a life-giving message of forgiveness—for our friends, our enemies, and ourselves. For readers who crave a story with the grit of real life and the grace redemption, *Come Down Somewhere* will satisfy and enlighten.”

STEPHANIE LANDSEM

author *In a Far-Off Land*

“The Jornada del Muerto and the Trinity test create a powerful and unique backdrop for this thoughtful coming-of-age story. I love the sincerity of Jenn’s writing and the earnestness with which she portrays complicated relationships. This is the perfect choice for readers who love historical fiction as well as women’s fiction.”

KATIE POWNER

author of *A Flicker of Light* and *Where the Blue Sky Begins*

“[A] lovely debut. . . . Wright’s adept depiction of the times capture the grit of the Dust Bowl. Fans of Tracie Peterson should check this out.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY on *If It Rains*

“The treatment of historical events is gritty and unflinching, similar to other Dust Bowl fiction, like Susie Finkbeiner’s *Cup of Dust* and Kristin Hannah’s *Four Winds*. Character growth is the highlight of this novel.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL on *If It Rains*

“A moving story about the struggles of those who endured the Dust Bowl period in Oklahoma’s history. . . . The reader will find themselves completely engrossed in its unfolding.”

FRESH FICTION on *If It Rains*

“Reminiscent of the striking narrative of Delia Owens and with the poetic grace of Julie Cantrell, Wright exhibits an inimitable voice and pitch-perfect historical acumen. Wholly immersive and gorgeously spun. . . . One of the freshest debuts I have read in an age by a uniquely talented author to watch!”

RACHEL MCMILLAN

author of *The London Restoration* and *The Mozart Code*, on *If It Rains*

“Set against the suffocating cloud of the Oklahoma Dust Bowl, *If It Rains* is an unforgettable debut. Wright’s evocative descriptions of grief and grace will echo with readers long after the last page has been turned.”

NAOMI STEPHENS

Carol Award-winning author of *Shadow among Sheaves*

“*If It Rains* transports you so fully, you catch yourself gasping for breath and praying for rain alongside the characters. And the characters! . . . Sisters Kathryn and Melissa are loyal but complicated, sincere but imperfect—and fiercely lovable. As they cling to courage and fight for faith, you find yourself doing the same. Their story stays with you long after you reach “The End.”

ELIZABETH LAING THOMPSON

author of *All the Feels* and the *When God Says* series

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Come Down Somewhere is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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To Jonathan, Matthew, and Meredith

This was truly a team effort.

PROVERBS 17:17

CHAPTER ONE

OLIVE

OCTOBER 1944

The Army moved in on a Sunday.

Moved in. That's what Uncle Hershel called it. Like they'd been a happy family out house hunting and found the perfect little bungalow. Like they hadn't just walked in and taken what was ours, claiming the government needed it for the war effort. Uncle Hershel could call it anything he pleased. I called it stealing.

I was in the hayloft when they arrived. Pushing things to the side, sweeping away years of dust and bird droppings, making space for boxes of things we were no longer allowed to keep in our house. Because our house, and over 75 percent of our land, was no longer ours. It was now property of the US government.

“Olive!” Ma’s voice came from outside, just below the window.

I didn’t answer. Instead, I jumped over a hole in the loft floor—one more thing we didn’t have the time or money to fix—and tossed a bag of old grain to the corner with a bang. Dust floated up from the impact, shimmering in the afternoon sun.

“Olive, come on down. Your brother can finish up there. I need you to help me move the last of this stuff into the casita.”

I stuck my head out of the narrow opening. “Make Avery do it. I’m already up here.”

Ma shielded her eyes as she looked up at me. “Avery is stronger than you. It’ll be easier for him to carry the boxes up the ladder. Besides—”

Her sentence was interrupted by a distant rumble. She and I turned at the same moment, searching for the source of the commotion. From my vantage point in the loft, the land spread out beneath me, shades of brown and green. Dirt and shrubs, rock and hills, miles of withered land fading in a pale sky. Ugly. Barren. *Home*. But now, in the distance, on the last hill before our house—the one with the Arizona sycamore, my initials carved in the trunk, bark worn smooth from climbing and that one branch perfect for reading . . . beside that hill, *my* hill, a large truck rolled to a stop, the words *US Army* stamped on the sides.

“They’re here,” Ma said unnecessarily. “Avery! Hershel! They’re here.”

I pulled back from the loft window as another truck reached the barn. Tires on gravel, engines cut, and in their absence, a stifling silence. I pressed myself against the wall. Unable to breathe. Unwilling to move. A slamming door, muffled voices. A man. And then my mother. Laughing.

I dug my fingernails into my arm and stared at my boots, inhaling the smell of manure and hay and memories of a place that was fading before my eyes.

And my mother was laughing.

From below came the squeak of the barn door being shoved aside and the rush of sunlight across gray, weathered beams. "Olive?"

Uncle Hershel. I pushed myself further against the wall.

"I know you're up there," he hissed. "Get down here. Now." The last word cut through my resolve the way only Uncle Hershel could.

The ladder creaked as I swung my feet over the side, shuddering beneath my hands as if it too felt my apprehension. As I jumped off the last rung, a small cloud of dust billowed out from under my boots. I straightened my back and jutted my chin against Uncle Hershel's glare.

The buttons of his flannel shirt strained over his chest as he wiped sweat from his thinning black hair. Sneering, he placed a battered cowboy hat back atop his head. "Get out here and say hello like is proper. Ain't gonna have these men thinking we've raised a bunch of savages."

"So today we care what the Army thinks, huh? Seems just a few weeks ago we hated Roosevelt and the war. Then your CPUSA buddies tell you that they've changed their mind, so now we *do* support the war. I can't keep—"

"Shut your mouth, Olive."

Hershel raised his hand, prepared to strike, but I ducked out of his way. He would always be bigger than me but now, at fifteen, I was faster.

He scowled. "When are you going to grow up and think about someone other than yourself? This country has made you soft and stupid, girl. When I was your age—"

But I withdrew from the barn before he could finish. I did not care what Hershel was like when he was my age. My bet was brooding and Russian—just like he was now.

The October sun was harsh and bright, summer refusing to give in to fall, as was often the case in this part of New Mexico. I walked with my head hung low. Staring at the ground, I tried to avoid the reality of what I knew I'd have to see eventually.

"Olive? Olive, this is Sergeant Hawthorne." My mother's tone was light, fake, grating.

"Olive, so nice to meet you."

Sergeant Hawthorne had dark hair, slick with pomade, and eyes as green as the Rio Grande valley in spring. He was tall—over six feet, if I had to guess—and muscular, evident even under the drab brown of his uniform. He stared at me with a smile that dimpled his cheeks. On a normal person, I would have found all of these traits appealing. Downright handsome.

Too bad I'd already decided to hate him.

He extended his hand. I didn't take it.

Beside me, my mother tittered and tugged at her dress. "Olive."

But still I did not shake his hand. After a moment, Sergeant Hawthorne pulled his arm back to his side but kept that stupidly handsome grin on his face. "It's alright, Mrs. Alexander. I've got a daughter around her same age. I know all about teenage girls."

The two of them laughed at his joke like it was funny, my mother's giggles morphing into one of her coughing fits.

"I'm sorry," she croaked. "This dust. You never really get used

to it.” Finally catching her breath, she cleared her throat and gestured as my brother strode forward. “And this is my son, Avery.”

Tall and wiry, with a mop of jet-black hair that would never lay flat, my brother looked younger than his nineteen years, though lately he more than made up for it with his ridiculous manly posturing. He thrust his shoulders back and shook Sergeant Hawthorne’s hand with enough force for the both of us.

Sergeant Hawthorne’s eyes widened as his arm jerked forward under the intensity of Avery’s grip. He stiffened, regaining his bearing, and let out an amused laugh. “Quite a handshake there, son.”

Avery pressed his lips into an absurd, overly serious non-smile.

“We could use a man like you in the ranks!”

“I actually leave in two days, sir.”

Sergeant Hawthorne dipped his head and grinned, completely oblivious to the effect Avery’s words had on my mother. The slight shift in her stance. The imperceptible intake of breath.

His initial application the year before had been rejected for medical reasons, though I knew nothing more about the story than Avery’s return from the enlistment office with fire in his eyes and whiskey on his breath, along with a string of curse words that made even Uncle Hershel’s mouth seem tame. Avery had never exactly been light, but his darkness had grown heavier since then. He spent less time in the house and more time in the casita, his bad temper exacerbated by our uncle’s own and fueled with a steady diet of Hershel’s never-ending rhetoric on this country and its problems.

Still, despite it all, I thought that was the end of it. The world would war, but we would continue on, untouched. And we did . . . for a while. Then the Army sent a letter. Next thing I knew, Hershel’s friends from California had shown up, and their loud

meetings in the casita—which now included Avery—grew louder and then markedly quieter. All manner of strange men came and went from the ranch for days before the whole lot of them just up and disappeared. That was when Avery announced the Army had changed its mind and he was leaving soon too.

Since then, my brother had started smiling more, my mother less and less. I had kept my head down, doing my chores and trying to pretend none of it was happening.

But here we were.

Uncle Hershel brushed past me, knocking my arm a little harder than necessary. “Sergeant Hawthorne, Hershel Alexander.”

“Hershel, yes. Nice to meet you. I can’t thank you enough for this.”

I glowered at the ground. As if we had a choice.

“It’s temporary, of course,” Sergeant Hawthorne was saying. “Just a billet for the men while construction is ongoing. Your house will be yours again before you know it. But the land could take longer. It’s all a matter of . . .” He swallowed whatever he was about to say. Awkwardness seeped into the air around us.

Because he couldn’t tell us when. He couldn’t tell us why. But he knew. He knew what all of this was for, what secrets the government was hiding beneath its “war effort” label. And that knowledge was a power over us no amount of smiles or small talk could ever erase.

“Let me show you around,” Uncle Hershel barked, breaking the tension. “We’re just about finished in the main house—a few odds and ends here and there—but let me go ahead and give you the lay of the land. Now, over here . . .” He put a hand at Sergeant Hawthorne’s elbow, leading him away.

My mother's shoulders collapsed as she watched their retreat. The smile, the joy, the facade faded as quickly as it had begun; she pulled a cigarette from her dress pocket and lit it with shaking hands. "Come on, Olive," she said wearily after taking a drag. "We still have work to do."

Inside the main house, Avery returned to stacking boxes in the hallway, Ma to loading dishes in the kitchen. I joined them, biting the inside of my cheek to stem tears as I folded blankets in the living room.

Pa had died seven years ago in a farming accident with a wayward bull. His brother, Hershel, had returned from California and moved into the casita not long after, sulking but dutiful; his temper and bad mood were a cloud the ranch had never quite been able to shake since. I couldn't help thinking that if Pa were still alive, none of this would be happening. It wasn't true, obviously—my father's presence couldn't stop the war any more than his absence—but I clung to the fantasy anyway.

"Olive, grab that pile there and take it to the casita. Avery, that stuff goes in the barn."

Avery grunted as he lifted two boxes at once. "You sure they're okay with us storing this stuff in the barn?"

My mother lit another cigarette, inhaling deeply before answering. "The barn is still ours. At least according to the papers they gave us. 'Eminent domain' or not, we still have to make a living, and we need that barn to do it. Though heaven knows how we're going to—"

"It'll be fine, Ma."

A look passed between my mother and brother, fleeting but pointed, before Avery broke off and disappeared out the door.

The smoke from Ma's cigarette curled around her gaze as she watched him walk away. It was several moments before she finally blinked and turned to me with a tepid smile.

I did not return it. Instead, I punched at a pile of blankets, trying to force them into a ball small enough to carry in one trip, and stalked from the house. I didn't want to look at her. Or Avery. And I sure as anything didn't want to hear the words *eminent domain* again. The government kept using them over and over. As if naming a thing made it right.

Uncle Hershel and Sergeant Hawthorne stood next to the Army truck, laughing and talking like old friends. I stuck my nose in the air as I passed them, not caring when the blankets began to slip, dragging in the dry New Mexico dirt. Let Ma sleep in filthy blankets tonight. At least she'd still be here at our ranch. Yes, the Army would be here. The land would be smaller, the big house no longer our own. But even in the casita, she'd still fall asleep to the coyotes howling, to the smell of sagebrush floating on the breeze. Tomorrow morning, she'd still wake up and watch the sun wash over the Jornada, the gray of night giving way to reds and browns and yellows, before stepping outside with Hershel, doing their work, living their lives, just as they'd always done.

And Avery? In a few days Avery would be shipping out, his duty finally realized, his restless anxiety now fused with purpose and a plan. With meaning.

But tomorrow morning I'd be in Alamogordo, opening my eyes to the pale-blue wallpaper at my grandmother's house on Delaware Avenue. The one with the cracked chimney that made the whole house smell like smoke and the fenced-in front yard that wasn't even big enough to grow a row of corn. The one where

the mountain view was obstructed by rows of other houses just like hers and where, instead of painted desert sunsets coloring the walls, there were portraits of Jesus in every room.

Sixty miles away but it might as well have been a million.

I should have been grateful. According to the posters, we all had a role to play in the war effort. We'd get our land back eventually, the Army had promised, when the war was over and the government was done. I should be proud to sacrifice in such a way.

And I was. I truly was. I wasn't necessarily happy about being forced to surrender our land and our livelihood, but we *were* at war. Deep down, I knew it wasn't really the Army's fault. But it was easier to rage against a stranger than stomach the truth. Less painful. No, it wasn't the Army I was mad at.

It was everybody else.

I didn't understand why *my* sacrifice meant relocating while Ma and Hershel got to stay. Why Avery moved closer to war and I had to move further away. Why I was being pushed out, treated like an in-the-way toddler rather than a useful part of the family. All around me, there was a great need for help . . . but apparently not the kind I could offer.

I threw the blankets on the floor of the casita, not bothering to take them all the way to the bedroom, and returned to the main house. My grief and anger rose with each step. The living room was empty, voices coming from the back part of the house.

No, not just the back part of the house. *My* part of the house.
No. No, no, no.

I ran toward the sound, skidding to a halt in the doorway. Avery was pulling books off my shelf, tucking them into a box labeled *Alamogordo*.

My mother, perched on the corner of my bed, was the first to see me. “Now, Olive, it’s the last room. We’ve waited as long as we could—”

I didn’t bother to listen to the rest of her words. I flung myself across the room at Avery as something between a scream and a wail erupted from my throat. The book in his hands—*Treasure Island*, one of Pa’s favorites—landed with a thud on the floor as he raised his arms, shielding himself from my blows.

“Get out of my room!” I screamed. My nails stabbed into his flesh. “Get out! Get out!”

“Olive! Olive, stop that!” My mother’s voice sounded far away, muted inside my anger.

Blood sprouted across Avery’s arm. I kept swinging anyway. It was immature, childish, as if we were kids again and he’d broken my favorite toy. But I didn’t care. Surprise shone in his eyes as he wriggled and dodged, trying both to block me and escape. I moved to connect with his cheek and felt my arm jerked back painfully.

“Knock it off!” The stink of sweat and tobacco pressed into me. Uncle Hershel pinned my wrist to my spine with one hand. His other dug into my bicep. “What in sam hill has gotten into you?”

My mother stood to one side, hands in front of her mouth. Sergeant Hawthorne hovered in the doorway. That stupid smile was finally gone from his face, and his shiny black shoes were covered in dust. At the sight of him—this stranger, this intruder, standing in my bedroom as if he owned it, because he did—the blood drained from my limbs. My body deflated.

Avery puffed out his chest and snatched the book from the ground. The cover ripped as he shoved it unceremoniously into the box. He smirked, daring me to say something or come at him again.

But instead of inciting me, that rip—that small rip in the cover of a book I hadn't read since childhood—broke me. I wrenched from Uncle Hershel's grasp, barely registering the tears on my mother's face through my own, and fled from the room. Momentarily blinded by the sun, I kept running, past the casita and the barn, past the corral, out into the open desert.

Ragged sobs choked me as the ground began to slope upward, stealing my breath but not my misery. I dodged the yuccas and juniper trees easily despite my blurry vision. The Chupadera Mesa was as familiar to me as my own hands. Every hill and valley, every sprig of creosote and blade of tobosa. I knew it all.

But now I was leaving. How long would it be before I forgot?

I didn't stop running until I came to the top of that particular slope, to the corner where the big boulder split, a cleft in its side shaped like lightning, opening into a secret space no one but us ever bothered to notice.

The burrow. My brother had called it that because we'd had to pretend to be small animals just to fit inside. Through the crack, a hidden ledge jutted like a makeshift balcony in front of a shallow cave that was really nothing more than a crawl space. We'd outfitted it with a door made of rotted wood and stuffed the inside with old moth-eaten blankets and pillows, comic books and dime-store novels.

It had been our spot, Avery's and mine. Back before Pa died and Hershel moved in. When we were still friends and life was still fun. But now it was *my* spot, my safe spot, a place to escape from Mama's grief, Avery's sullenness, and Uncle Hershel's temper. A remnant of childhood I refused to let go. Because up here, among the rocks and the shrubs, I could still pretend life made sense.

From this spot, I was perfectly hidden, yet I could see our ranch hundreds of feet below, shimmering in the heat. In the distance rose the ragged top of Oscura Peak; across the gentle slopes of the mesa came the dark stain of the ancient lava field to the east and the faint glint of the gypsum dunes to the south. I slid to my knees as a fresh wave of sorrow washed over me.

The ranch had been in our family for over half a century, before New Mexico was even New Mexico. Since my grandparents had emigrated from the motherland with their two small boys in tow. Back then, no one wanted a piece of the Jornada del Muerto. And why would they? The “Route of the Dead Man” was nothing but a wasteland, a ninety-mile stretch of desert between Socorro and El Paso with no water, little vegetation, and summer temperatures hot enough to boil your blood.

But the land “called” to my grandparents, or so the story went. Grandpa built the adobe walls of our home with his bare hands. The pitched roof, the chicken coop, the barn, the horse corral . . . everything here bore his mark. As a teenager, Hershel had fled, claiming he was going back to Russia to fight in the revolution. (Pa swore he never made it out of California, though, joking his mouth was bigger than his courage—a rumor I quickly learned not to bring up in my uncle’s presence, lest I wanted to be on the wrong end of his violent rebuttal.) But my father had stayed in his adopted homeland, his Soviet blood thawing in the New Mexico sun. My grandfather added the casita, attached to the house by a courtyard wall, a year after my parents’ wedding. He and my grandmother planned to finish out their days there while my parents started a family of their own in the main house.

And they did. Grandpa died in the casita’s back bedroom and

was buried in the far corner lot. My grandmother followed soon after.

Pa took over after that, making the ranch his own by adding a third bedroom onto the main house for his daughter. Me. Every memory I had—of him, of my family, of my life—centered around this ranch.

New Mexico. Our home. *My* home. Only it wasn't mine anymore.

I wept for what seemed like hours, until my eyes burned and my cheeks cracked beneath dry tears. Until the sun lay only a finger width above the mountains and the shadows began to stretch, dappling the landscape with previews of the coming night. That's when I heard the sound of crunching rocks; Avery's eyes appeared through the crack in the boulder.

I swatted at my face, wiping away the grit of evaporated sorrow.

"You look awful," he said, crawling through and dropping down beside me. He stretched his long legs in front of him, draping them over the edge of the cliff.

I scooted away, scowling. "At least my clothes match."

He glanced down at his outfit. "Mine don't?"

A pair of jeans and a dingy-white shirt matched well enough, but Avery had been color-blind since birth; making fun of him for it was stupid but routine. A pathetic grasp at normal when the world was anything but.

"I'm sorry about your book."

I glanced at the welts on his arms and the subtle swelling of his cheek. It looked painful enough to cause a smidge of regret. "I'm sorry for blowing a fuse and kicking your rear."

"Psssh. You didn't."

“Sure about that?”

He tapped his fingers lightly against the beginnings of a bruise. “I was just trying to be a good big brother. Letting you win.”

“Oh, shut up, Avery.”

But I couldn’t stop a smile from creeping over my lips. He grinned and gave me a playful jab in the shoulder.

We turned our attention to the sunset, watching the sky melt from yellow to orange to red. After a moment, I heard him sigh.

“You know, you can’t hide up here forever, Olive.”

“I wasn’t hiding. I just wanted to be *alone*,” I added pointedly.

But my attempt at humor fell flat. Instead, Avery’s face remained serious. “Ma’s worried about you.”

“Good.”

“Now, stop it. That ain’t no way to be.”

“Ain’t no way to be? You don’t have any right to tell me which way to be. You’re *leaving*.”

“Just because I’m leaving don’t mean I don’t care about what happens here.”

I stared at my boots. The laces were frayed, the toes scratched. Memories of a place that no longer existed. I pulled my elbows into my sides. “Why are they making me go?” I had thought my tears were spent but here they were, springing up once again. “It’s not fair. Especially with you gone. I’m practically an adult. I can help! They can’t do this all on their own.”

“Olive . . .”

“Why don’t they want me here?”

Avery shifted, his discomfort obvious. “Olive, there are some things in this world that are bigger than us. Bigger than our family, bigger than our home. I know you don’t understand that yet—”

“Oh, just dry up, will you?” That was another thing Avery had started doing. He was only four years older than me, but he acted like it was ten. Like he was so wise and worldly, when the farthest he’d ever been was Albuquerque. “I know there’s a war going on, same as you.”

“I ain’t talking about the war.”

I turned to look at him, but his face remained forward, staring at the spot where the sun had just dipped below the horizon. He pushed a strand of dark hair off his forehead.

“I mean, I am talking about the war. But there’s more to it than that. There are some things . . .” He stopped and sighed deeply. “What I’m trying to say is there are some things even bigger than the war, Olive. I . . . I can’t explain. But I hope one day you’ll understand.”

I tilted my head to one side. “What do you mean, Avery?”

“Nothing. It’s nothing.” He gave me a small smile. “Just . . . just know that I do care, okay? No matter what you think, no matter what you see or hear. I do care. About you, about Ma, about this.” He took my hand, pressing one finger into the dirt. Up to a point, then down again. An upside-down V. It was the same symbol carved into the rock behind us. The one we’d sign in the air when Hershel got ugly, write on papers slid under each other’s door when we’d been sent to our rooms, or leave written in the dirt when Mama’s incapacitating grief made the chore load overwhelming.

The three points representing the only stable things in a world of instability: me, Avery, the mesa. Home.

We hadn’t used the symbol in over two years. But the weight of it now beneath our entwined fingers made the lapse evaporate.

I leaned against him, wanting to cling to this feeling but knowing it was pointless.

He must have known it too. Rather than hug me back, he pulled away. "That's why I'm going, Olive. And that's why you have to go too. We all have our parts to play."

And then he was gone. His words hung in the air. Although I knew he was only going back to the ranch, it felt as if he were already a thousand miles away. Because he was; he had been for months. And no amount of childish reminiscing was going to change that.

Below me, clouds of dust rose from the desert floor as three more Army trucks made their way up our long drive. As I watched them, I knew I should have felt something like pride. Comradery. Duty. The honor of sacrifice, of being a part of something bigger.

And I tried. Because he was right—all of that stuff was meaningful and important. All of that stuff mattered.

The only thing that didn't matter was me.