

In the following passage, a card sharp plays a crafty late-night game and we're introduced to a tough-as-nails heroine.

Jamie shielded her eyes from a gust of wind blowing down the street and crossed the dirt yard in front of her uncle's trailer. A beagle huddled against the night air in the back of a pickup lifted its head and whined, but Jamie had nothing to feed it. Halfway up the porch steps, she heard the men inside, grabbed the mail that no one had bothered to collect for the last few days, and opened the door.

The air inside was thick with smoke and the smell of beer and whiskey. The wind from outside lifted her uncle's ball cap, but he caught it and said, "Shut that door before everything goes flying."

He sat at the head of the kitchen table with five of his buddies, most of them still wearing blue work shirts from their shifts at the fertilizer plant south of town. Every Friday night, these men clocked out at five o'clock sharp and drove to her Uncle Loyal's place for a night of booze and poker. Years ago she'd vowed never to become some good old boy's wife sitting around a duplex waiting for her life to turn out like her own mother's had. Not when she was so good at poker and not when other nineteen-year-olds were already playing the professional circuit. She had almost enough money to go pro, and pretty soon her little brother would be big enough to handle himself alone with their uncle.

Loyal tossed an empty pizza box on the floor and peeked at his hole cards, a bottle of Jack Daniels parked near his elbow. His best buddy, the county judge, sat to his left looking somewhat out of place in this group with his neatly trimmed gray hair and red sweater, but his presence explained the Cadillac parked alongside the pickups outside. The sight of him made her bristle; Keating was the one who'd decided Jamie and Toby would live with their uncle while their mother spent those eight years in prison, but he rarely came around to this side of town.

Toby belched and wiped his mouth, avoiding the welt that ran the length of his cheekbone. His eyelids sloped just short of shut as he guzzled the dregs of a beer, crushed the can with his fist, and threw it toward the garbage. An empty shot glass was his card marker and he was down to his last chip, which he tossed into the pot. "I'm all in," he slurred.

A few beers and a little whiskey and Toby was trashed enough to make a stupid bet. He was always the first player to go broke. Jamie searched the remaining pizza boxes until she found a piece of crust and chewed it while she watched the hand play out.

Loyal called the boy's bet and huffed when Toby flipped over a two/three.

"Whatever." Toby tripped when he stood and the table rocked beneath his weight.

"Get him out of here, Jamie." Loyal pushed the boy away.

It seemed Toby might push back or take a swing at his uncle, but his face went slack with the effort to stay upright and he lurched toward the dark hallway. Judge Keating grabbed one of his arms and helped Jamie steer him down the hall to the back room.

Toby passed out facedown on his cot, stinking of boyhood and pepperoni.

“I hear he can be a handful,” Keating said.

She expected him to drop Toby on the cot and leave, but he just stood there. The room was too tight to have a grown man standing in it. Jamie turned on the lamp. Clothes and school books were scattered on the floor, and with their two cots there wasn't much room to navigate. Keating hovered near the doorway as though his being in this cramped room was natural. It wasn't and she wished he'd leave. It was nobody's business how they lived. He looked around the room and she could feel him judging every detail, the torn curtains, grimy plywood floor, the old thin mattresses sunk low in the middle.

“You two share this room?”

“Yeah.” He knew how they lived and she took it as a put-down. She picked up a pair of jeans and folded them, giving him a look that meant it was time for him to go.

But Keating lingered. He pointed at the Army recruitment poster hanging on the wall over Toby's bed. A uniformed soldier standing in front of a U.S. flag. “I wanted to join the Army when I was his age, too,” he said. “Guns and tanks. Boys like to dream about powerful things like that.”

Jamie hated that poster, those eyes always staring at her, but Toby was crazy for anything Army. “He's going to military camp for the summer.”

“That private school upstate? You got money for that?”

It was a stupid question. They never had that kind of money and this man standing in her room with his brand-new L.L.Bean sweater knew it. The back of her neck got hot. “They let two kids in for free last year.”

“Hardship case, huh? I got an old friend there. I could give him a call. I doubt he'll get in without a decent reference.”

Keating stepped closer to her. She flinched before she realized he was just turning to leave.

“It's only a phone call.” He hesitated at the dresser by the door and picked up a framed photograph of her and Toby with their mother from ten years ago. “Huh,” he said. “He looks like his dad.”

“You knew him?” It always shocked her to realize there were people in town who had known her father when he'd been dead half her life.

“Of course. Knew both your parents in high school, decades ago. And you look a lot like your mother.”

People who knew Phoebe Elders were always saying that, and it bothered Jamie. She saw herself as different and cringed at the notion that fate was handed down through family DNA.

He touched a finger to the photo. The gesture was intimate and wrong for someone outside the family. Jamie grabbed at the frame, accidentally jabbing a fingernail into the back of his hand. He winced and dropped the frame.

She stepped backward. “Sorry.” She picked the frame up off the floor. There was a crack in the glass, but she could fix it with a little tape.

Keating loomed in the doorway, rubbing his hand. “It's nothing.”

Toby, thick-headed with sleep, muttered something that sounded like, “Nah, man,” and rolled over.

She held the photograph to her chest. “Sometimes he talks in his sleep.”

“That camp might teach him a few things, maybe keep him out of county detention—and from that last social services report, I’d say that’s where he’s headed.”

Wind slammed across the open field out back and shook the trailer on its foundation. Jamie tried to think of a comeback but got caught up worrying about that social services report. Six months to his eighteenth birthday and then they’d both be out of the system.

“That camp works out, you can pay me back someday,” he said as he left the room. He disappeared down the hallway and Jamie shut the door, wishing it had a deadbolt. It didn’t sit well, being indebted to anyone even in this small way. Debts and favors were exactly how Blind River kept its hold on people.

She sat on her cot up against the wall, pulled her laptop out of her backpack, and powered it up. Its rumble and grind suggested yet another failing battery, but she was able to get online and log into her bank account to check if the transfer from her latest winnings had been deposited. It hadn’t. She logged into the poker site and checked the date of her withdrawal. Seven days had passed. A few days was normal, but she would need a new computer any moment now, and every day that the money didn’t show up added to the worry that something had gone wrong. If the transfer didn’t come by morning, she’d have to figure another way to get online, because every day she wasn’t making money meant one more day in this town. The windowpane over her bed rattled in the wind, and she pulled a blanket around her shoulders.

Through the thin walls of the trailer she heard the men in the outer room, their voices low and rhythmic as they grumbled and traded chips, complained about running low on beer, and convinced Loyal to crack open another bottle of whiskey. Footsteps thudded down the hallway, and Jamie thought about pushing her cot against the door. A minute later the toilet flushed. The footsteps stopped outside her door, and she held her breath until her uncle called out something muffled and angry and the footsteps trudged back up the hall.

She flipped through the day’s mail, stopping at an envelope with the official seal of the family services department. The social worker had just visited them and they weren’t due to see her again for months. It still floored her how Ms. Jilkins could appear on any given day and demand an explanation for the smallest infraction. The envelope was addressed to her uncle, but she tore it open anyway. Just as she suspected, Jilkins had ordered another meeting to discuss Toby, this time with the high school principal on Monday afternoon. Jamie would have bet anything that Keating had been copied privately. She wanted to rip the letter in half. Instead she folded it and stuck it inside her backpack until she could think it through.

She closed her laptop and yellow haze from the streetlight filled the room, shining on the Army poster. Toby refused to take it down, claiming he could put up whatever he wanted on the one wall that belonged to him. She turned away from the poster. She hated that face constantly staring out from that wall. Outside a truck backfired and she peeked through the curtain—just a neighbor off to the graveyard shift at the plant. Toby snored loudly, but Jamie would be awake until the men left. She might at least get some practice.

She went to the kitchen and poured a glass of milk. They were a bunch of hacks, no skill or finesse, but they were happy to let her deal and pushed their chairs around so she could have the spot closest to the center of the table. She didn't look at anyone, knowing they were eyeing her.

"How do we know there's nothing up her sleeve?" Keating asked, only half teasing. She waited for her uncle's cue.

"Pull your sleeves up, girl," Loyal said.

She made a show of it, pushing the sleeves of her sweater up to her elbows and turning her palms up, then down. "All good?"

They grumbled okay.

She gathered the cards from the last hand, still face up. Jacks over aces. She flipped the aces over. The cards were old and worn and felt like feathers on her fingertips. Some were split along the sides, bent at the corners, or rolled so they wouldn't lie flat on the table. She gathered them quickly, shuffled them twice, and sent the hole cards flying.

"Wait a minute." Lenny Chiles, the youngest guy there, sat opposite Loyal at the other end of the table. "What's up with these cards?"

She held the deck in her left hand and waited for Loyal. This was his game, his home, his rules, and Lenny was about to get schooled by a man with a quick temper.

"We're in the middle of a hand, Lenny." Keating held out his palm as though they were in a courtroom.

Lenny tossed one of his hole cards to the center of the table. "That one's marked."

The card sat in the middle of the table, a tiny smear on its upper right corner. Jamie cut her eyes toward Loyal and saw what any of them could see if they looked—red in the corner of his thumbnail. She squelched a smile. Loyal was lousy at cards but decent at marking them. Chew a nail past the quick and smear a corner with blood. It was late and these men were unpredictable when they were tanked on whiskey and beer. The mark was so obvious she was surprised a fight hadn't already broken out.

Loyal shrugged. "We're all hardworking men. Everybody's got cuts."

Keating said, "Let's be gentlemen here."

Lenny reached out and flipped the card over. The ace of hearts. "But that blood on your thumb only made its way to the corner of this ace?"

Loyal seemed twice the size of Lenny when he stood over the table. "You got a problem? Say what you mean or get out."

"I'm just saying it's kinda funny. Maybe we should get our money back."

"This isn't my style," Keating said. "I think this game is over." He stood, picked up his coat, and slipped out the front door.

The men were alert now. They pushed back from the table as Loyal walked around them, grabbed Lenny, and pushed him into the wall. “You don’t get your money back just by calling foul. We been playing with these same cards all night.”

“Long enough for someone to mark ’em good.”

“You’re losing and now you want your money back so you’re making up some shit?”

Jamie was trapped between the table and the kitchen counter. She crouched low in her chair, ready to slide under the table if they came to blows. This guy was an idiot challenging her uncle in his own home in front of others. Lenny’s head snapped backward before Jamie realized Loyal had decked him on the chin. His knees buckled briefly and his eyes rolled skyward. The wall shook from the thud of his body, but he caught himself from falling.

Loyal rubbed his fingers. “You just went half a round with my fist and bought yourself a fifty-dollar story.” He went to the front door and threw it open. “Get him out of here.”

The men grabbed their jackets and headed out, chuckling at Lenny but pulling him along behind them.

Dogs barked and jumped up at the chain-link fences. Doors slammed, engines roared. Loyal turned the lights out and sat on the couch, his shotgun across his lap. Jamie sat on the opposite end. She fingered a burn hole that had been there forever, waiting. It grew quiet again. An orange glow flared briefly in the dark as Loyal lit his last cigarette of the night. He was waiting, and because she knew that, she waited, too.

A diesel engine sounded from a block away. Headlights careened across the walls as a truck returned and rounded the corner. A single gunshot cracked the silence and Jamie dropped to the floor. There was a small explosion and a short burst of falling glass as the streetlight went out. Someone laughed maniacally in the distance. She covered her head expecting a second shot, hoping it wouldn’t come through the window, but the truck’s engine faded into the wind. Her hands shook like they did when she got scared. She couldn’t help it and tucked them between her legs.

“That asshole,” Loyal said, glancing at her sideways. “You calling it in?” she asked, knowing he wouldn’t want to. He hated cops, and besides, outside the city limits of Blind River, they never came. Maybe for a dead body but not for random gunfire or a shot-out streetlight.

“No. I hated that fucking light anyway.” He headed down the short hallway to his room. “Get some sleep. I got a run for you in the morning,” he said, and shut the door.

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