

SECOND RESPIRE

Pointing Fingers

When Flower ducks under the bar, she's usually going for her shotgun, or at least pretending to, and when Roy sees Paul in the back of the crowd, he hopes to God Flower's doing it again. But this time she emerges with a box full of blue masks, like the kind the doctors wear on *ER*. She ought to keep her finger by the trigger, but she doesn't.

"Come on, take a bunch, pass 'em down," she says, nudging the box toward the end of the bar. "Ain't safe walking around without 'em."

"Ain't safe walking around, period," says Roy, slumped over at the corner of the bar—usual seat, unusual posture. "Just plain ain't safe."

"Ah, c'mon, it'll pass," says Flower. She slings the band of the mask across her chubby index finger and pulls, like she's going to launch it at the cap of Roy's bowed head, but instead she hands it off to Paul—Paul, of all people, who's managed to work his way up to the bar through the crowd of regulars.

They call her Flower because she's not. She's a big woman, an operatic fat lady but a hell of a lot tougher, and she runs her bar with an iron fist and an authority no one would dare question, or want to. She's the den mother, and under her watchful eye, Herman Road is a family. It's dangerous to step foot outside, with all the folks running around crazy and sick, but everyone important's here, and safe. Save two.

"Can I get a drink?" says Roy, glancing up a little bit, just enough to see Paul—just enough to know he's there.

"Ain't serving tonight, Roy. *Think*. We're here to figure things out.

Can't figure nothin' out when you can't even stand on your own two feet." Flower laughs and offers him a surgical mask. Roy points to the one already hanging around his neck.

"For your wife," says Flower.

"She ain't going nowhere," says Roy, turning his eyes back down to the hardwood of the bar.

Roy's dad was a regular before Roy was, back when Flower ran the place with her own old man. Coming to the Pub is an old family tradition, like getting loaded here, and passing out here, and having the neighborhood boys you grew up with and went to school with and got jobs with carry you home to the girl next door you wound up marrying. But taking care of your own, and protecting the family you care about, extended and otherwise, is tradition, too, and it's out of tradition as much as necessity Roy stays. You gotta protect what's close to you.

Paul leans against the bar and keeps his eyes down like he's got something to feel guilty about.

"Everyone take a seat now? C'mon, take a seat," says Flower, banging a mug against the bar like a judge's gavel, calling her court to order. It's the same way she did it the day she announced Isaac's little girl got into Bryn Mawr, or even just for old Willy's eighty-ninth birthday.

The scattered lines of random conversations die down, and the smiling faces turn harder, like in a town hall meeting of the most severe sort. Old stools and chairs scrape against the ancient floor and echo along the wooden walls, and soon there's only low coughs and whispers.

Roy watches Paul take a seat by his wife, Ani, up in the front, at the other end of the bar. He keeps them in his line of sight—keeps them nice and trapped before they get a chance to even think about escaping.

"I wanna thank all you for coming," says Flower, hand still clutching the mug. "Big risk just walking down the street, I know, but lemme tell ya, things get tough, bigger risk in not sticking together."

"Amen!" shouts a voice from the back.

"You be quiet," says Flower, gesturing towards the speaker with the mug, like she's giving a toast. The crowded hall fills with the light laughter of a reunion. "This is a family," says Flower, "and this here's a



family place, see, and family takes care of each other. Now, this place used to house my brothers and my dad and me, and I still got a lotta extra room, so anyone wants to stick it out here, that's fine by me. This is your home 'smuch as mine."

"Can't stick it out," mutters Roy. A family can't stick it out when they treat the bad guy like an adopted son.

The man sitting next to him stares for a moment, then turns back toward Flower and shouts out, "What about food?"

"Damn good question, and we're tryin' to figure that out," says Flower. "We got a lotta leftover dinners the Corps and the Cross left behind. We're storin' 'em down at Steve's Market for now, and that's where we're gonna go for food. Short walk from here, and we'll bring the food down, eat together. Should be all right for a couple weeks till the government brings more."

This seems not to be good enough, and a bunch of muddled voices start to raise a ruckus until Flower beats it back down with her mug. "Hey! Hey!" she says. "We ain't alone in this. Phones work. We'll keep makin' calls till we get what we need. Chances are always better 'slong as we stick together. We don't know what caused this—"

"Like hell we don't," says Roy, and this time everyone listens.

"Roy?" says Flower.

"Guys wanna know why we're stuck in here? Why we can't go more than a block without worrying about who's gonna get sick and go goddamn nuts on us?" He points toward Paul. "Take a look at Osama over there."

A hundred eyes follow Roy's finger to Paul, and to Paul's gently middle-eastern features. Paul looks around a little bit, like he's trying to find out who Roy's pointing to, before he realizes everyone's focused on him. "Excuse me?" he says.

"This disease—it ain't natural. Sure as hell ain't natural," says Roy. He slams his hands onto the smooth, aged wood of the bar counter. "This ain't something happened. It's something done to us, and there's the guy what did it."

"Hey!" says Paul, standing up and kicking the barstool away. "Shut the hell up. I'm as scared as any of us—"

"Like fuck you are," says Roy. "Probably think this lands you in heaven with a buncha virgins or something . . ."

And that's when Paul tears towards Roy, but the crowd's too

thick, and arms reach out under Paul's shoulders and pull him up off the ground. He fights against them, has the balls to call Roy a bigot, tries to slam his head back into the chin of the big man right behind him, but he's got no leverage.

"Paul!" yells Ani, and that seems to calm him down a little—enough that the big man loosens his grip—but his gaze is as focused on Roy as Roy's was on Paul before this whole thing got started.

"Hey, hey, hey!" says Flower. She stomps over toward Roy and crashes her mug down right in front of his face. "What the hell you think you're doing, Roy, huh? Last thing we need right now's to be fighting with each oth—"

"He ain't one of us. Last thing we need right now," says Roy, calmly, "is to be blind when someone's spittin' in our eyes."

One last time, Flower smashes the mug to the counter, and with her other hand, she points to the door. "Out of my bar," she says. "Out of my bar. Ain't even drunk, and you're stirring up shit like this. Out."

And no one argues with Flower when she gets that way, so Roy nods, flashes a look at Paul, who's still being restrained but not really fighting anymore—one last look to let the guy know he's on to him. Then Roy forces his way through the crowd of friends and family toward the door he's passed through nearly every day of his life.



"Throw me out," Roy mumbles as he pushes open the squeaky door to his apartment. "Can get drunk at home." He walks to the refrigerator and grabs himself a Coors, and as he's taking his first sip, he finds his eyes wandering up to the top of that lime green monster of a fridge, where Trina keeps the bananas in a basket, and sitting up there is the bear—the tiny, furry toy in a white T-shirt with a heart on it. Clutching the drink in his left hand, Roy reaches up and grabs it, and stares down at it.

He puts it back.

Roy takes another sip and walks into the bedroom, where Trina, bald as a newborn, lies on the bed with Becca, eight years old and out like a light. Teresa's nowhere to be found, of course, but still he half-expects to see her there. It's dark outside, but the light's on, and Trina, half-asleep herself, turns to Roy as he walks in.



"Hey," she says, rolling over flat onto her back.

Roy responds with a slurp. He looks down at his sleeping little girl, then out the window.

"How'd it go?" asks Trina.

Sip.

"Fine," says Roy. "Went fine." He sits down on the right side of the bed, by Becca, and straightens her hair along her back. "Everything's fine."

"Is she coming back?"

Sip. Roy looks out the window, but it's too bright inside to see through the dark out there, and besides, there's nothing to see. "Doubt it," says Roy. "Flower don't seem to think so, and she talked to them last, probably."

Trina rolls back onto her side. "Oh," she says. Her hands rub against the thick covers like she's petting some mutt. "There a plan?"

"I don't know, Trina . . . didn't stay the whole thing."

"Roy!"

"Didn't much see the point—"

"Roy, we gotta know what's going on . . . and we need things, 'sides. You ask about—"

"Didn't get the chance," says Roy. She looks at him like he forgot to bring home a paycheck, so he adds, "I'll ask tomorrow, when it ain't so crowded. It'll be fine." He takes a sip of his beer—the last sip. "This'll pass."

Won't, though. Roy bends the can a little and heads back out into the kitchen, telling himself there's some things a man can't take care of. You can't control what other people do and what other people do to you. That raghead bastard from the bar pops into his mind as he crushes the can in his hand and tosses it into the open trashcan, stuffed nearly to overflowing. The can bounces off some paper ball and lands on the tiled floor, spilling drops of booze around like little polka dots.



The Pub's emptier when the next day comes round—empty even for a Thursday at noon. It's not that people are always drinking this time of day. This is the neighborhood place to go, hang

out, shoot a few, and kick back, and there's usually a couple guys in the back playing pool and a lunch-break poker game going on in the corner. A lot less people are willing to come, though, when even getting here's a risk, and there's a lot less people who need a break when they can't, or won't, leave their homes. But this here's the norm, this place is tradition, and as long as Roy can stop by here, the same old world's still around.

When Roy walks through the door, it's just Flower there, and a couple cops—a man in his thirties, a woman in her forties—having some words with her. The cops stand right in front of Roy's stool, so he eyes another one more toward the middle.

"Yo, Roy, you hear this?" says Flower, all of yesterday's anger gone for a regular. That's the thing about Flower: She'll get mad, she'll toss you out, she'll think nothing of it, but at the end of the day, or the start of the next one, she knows this is still a community she's leading and she's pretty forgiving, unless someone's there just to stir up shit. That she won't abide, and that's why the cops don't have to come around here too often.

"What?" says Roy. He takes the stool.

"Think they can take away my shotgun," says Flower. She talks about it like it's the old family pet. Unmasked, she reaches down below the bar and pulls out a mug, then starts to fill it with Coors.

"It's for your own protection, ma'am," says the male cop, looking around awkwardly, like he expects the regular crowd to charge in and clobber him any second, which they may just do if he isn't fair to Flower. His name tag says "Weathers." The woman's says "Ballinger."

"Really? 'My own protection?'" says Flower, dropping the mug in front of Roy. "Seems to me 'my own protection's' the reason I got the gun in the first place."

"Lady, listen," says Ballinger, "just two blocks down we've got people out in the streets, out in the *streets*, so fucking panicked they're trying to blast their way out of the quarantine. We've got all kinds of people so sick out of their tiny little minds they can't do nothing else but pick up the nearest weapon and shoot whatever the hell they think is out to get them. We've got enough trouble without having to worry about every private citizen with a gun."

"You hearing this, Roy?" says Flower.

Roy is, and while it doesn't make sense all the way, at least



they're trying to do something about the problem and make this place a little safer. Be even better if they cracked down on the rag-heads and beat the cure out of them, or at least the disease, so government scientists could study the toxin or whatever and come up with some way to turn it around or stop it.

"All them things," says Flower, "is exactly why I gotta have this gun of mine. What if some diseased whack-job tries to get into my bar? What then? We're a community here. Gotta keep each other safe."

"Don't give up the gun," says Ballinger, "and you don't get food. That's the deal."

"Anne . . ." says Weathers.

"That's the deal," she says, staring Weathers down.

Flower pauses, and the pause takes Roy off-guard because he's here every day and he's never seen her speechless before. "You can't do that," says Flower.

"Way it's gotta be," says Ballinger. "We got our orders. Only way to keep things under control."

Another pause. Flower actually takes a step back, closer to the shotgun, like she's going to reach down and pet it before saying goodbye. "I'll think about it," she says, almost in a whisper.

Ballinger nods, and Weathers looks like a thief caught in the act. They turn to leave, and Roy realizes, it does make sense, the deal they're offering. You can't go outside to get the things you need, especially when they're things you can't buy at Steve's, and if everyone's armed, guns aren't much protection anymore, so you need the help.

"Wait," says Roy, and they stop as the bar door swings open. "I got a pistol . . . old gun, my old man's, down the street, 1209, room 403," he says. "My wife, she needs . . ."

And that's when Roy sees who's just walked in: Paul, all calm and casual, right past the cops like he knows they can't do anything to stop him. He could have a knife behind his back or a bomb strapped to his chest and all they'd do is look the other way because they're supposed to be all fair and PC and all that crap. "That's the guy," says Roy.

Ballinger and Weathers turn to Paul, who looks past them right at Roy. Flower, meanwhile, takes a deep breath and says to them,

"That's Paul. He's fine. One of the regulars."

Sure, everyone's a regular once they cheat their way in. Roy remembers Paul a year or so back, new kid out of Cleveland, college degree, a little bit down after some mishaps he wouldn't talk about, stuck working with Roy and the gang at Walton Paper. The first couple months, nothing changed Roy's mind about the guy: kind of snobby, standoffish, and real weird, working through breaks and even through lunch, back turned away and nose turned up at the guys who grew up around here and earned their jobs.

"Nerve of him," Kyle had said, "after all his people done to us. Oughtta spend every day saying how sorry he is—that's what he oughtta do."

Roy saw the guy as just another jackass, though, until Paul wound up assistant plant manager, even though Roy'd been petitioning for the job for months, and even though every other guy in the plant wanted Roy to get it. The boss explained about the business degree and how that kind of qualification matters, but experience counts for something, too, and when Roy approached Paul to tell him that, Paul just turned, grinned—the only time he'd smiled the whole time he'd worked there—and said, "Get back to work."

There are all kinds of things that take a guy from point A to point B, but when Roy looks back, this is what stands out—this Muslim bastard taking the job and the money that were his—and that's what lead him to this, to now, to him and his family trapped in some disease-ridden hellhole, with hope and health and even Teresa taken away from them. And Paul's people, people like Paul—they've got to be behind it, and that's the biggest injustice of all.

So Roy wants to protest when Flower stands up for the guy, but he can't get thrown out of the place again—he likes it here and, besides, he needs a beer. Not much beer left anywhere else. So Ballinger takes a look at Paul first, then Roy, and says, "We'll be by later." To talk about Paul? To talk about the gun? Good either way.

So the cops leave, but Paul stays. He takes a seat two stools down from Roy, asks Flower for a beer, and begins tapping his fingers on the bar in some kind of intricate rhythm Roy can't make out. When Flower puts the beer down, Paul stops and takes a sip. He doesn't pay, because Flower stopped charging once the plague began and money stopped being a consideration, and the community's been



nice enough not to take advantage of that. "Running low?" Paul asks.

"So far, so good," says Flower, helping Roy out with a refill. "No means for more supplies, but not so many customers, so I ain't losing product fast as you'd think."

"Losing profit, though," says Roy.

"Well, yeah."

"What's your wife need, Roy?" says Paul. He takes a sip, then turns to Roy, whose eyes are focused on the copper-tinted wood at the bottom of the foamed-over beer.

"Shut up," says Roy.

Paul swirls the beer around in his mug like it's champagne. "That's what you said to the cops, right? Wife needs something?" Then he adds, almost under his breath, "I can think of a few things."

Roy looks up, glares at him, clutching the handle of the mug like he's about to break it against the bar.

"Paul!" says Flower, like an overworked mother at her son's birthday party.

"Just a guess," Paul says.

He's about to take another sip when Flower puts her pudgy hand atop the mug, holding it steadily on the counter, where a little liquid ring forms along the wood. "Yesterday's yesterday," she says. "Let it go."

"Like hell it's yesterday," says Paul, his voice breaking a little bit, his hand squeezing against his drink. "Guy just tells the cops to come after me. Like hell it's yesterday."

Roy stands up and pushes the stool into the bar. Paul instinctively scoots his own stool back just a little. "This thing's fucked up all our lives," Roy says, "and you got a better idea where it came from?" He's looking at Flower, like if he stares at her hard enough, he can push some mental block out of her mind and she'll see what's really going on here. "You got a better idea? It's this guy screwed up my life, him and his fucking Muslim frien—"

"Goddamn it, I'm not even Muslim!" shouts Paul, rising to his feet. "I'm an *atheist*, you racist—"

"Hey! Shut up! Both of you!" yells Flower, leaning over the counter and filling the space between them. "Three people in this bar and two gonna start a fight over some fool notion and a thin skin."

Paul gestures like he's about to say something, then doesn't,

slumping into his seat like a petulant child. Still on his feet, Roy glares down at the enemy.

"Ain't his fault, Roy," says Flower, intercepting the gaze.

Roy turns and looks at her for a second. Then, he sits down, slowly, clutches his drink, and takes a long sip. He wipes some drops of beer off his mouth.

"It's *somebody's* fault," Roy says.



When Ballinger and Weathers come by again, it's the middle of the next day, and this time Roy hasn't bothered to go outside. No point, really, not if the only other guy out there is that bastard Paul, and not if the cops are right and the freaks are armed. Gun or no gun, he's got to be there to protect his family from the blistered whack-jobs wandering around outside, and from the real-life monsters who must have made them.

"It's not their fault," says Weathers, as he takes the old revolver from Roy's hands and opens the chamber, checking for bullets. "The virus—it starts at the skin and drills its way up into their brains. Messes them up inside. I doubt they've got any control there, in the end." He drops the bullets into his palm and pockets them. "Not their fault."

Maybe not, but it's *somebody's* fault. The world isn't one big domino effect, things piling up against you and yours. Families don't just find themselves locked away from the world that made them. Families don't just fall apart.

"Medicine, you said?" says Weathers.

"Um, yeah," says Roy, rubbing his nose. "For my wife. Cancer stuff . . . I have a list . . ." He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a crumpled piece of paper.

"Won't be easy," says Ballinger. "Everyone else is just food and supplies."

Before Roy can respond, Weathers says, "We can figure out something, though. The hospitals are gonna be pretty tapped, but give that here. We'll see what we can do."

Roy hands over the paper, and Weathers puts it in his other pocket.



Ballinger, undermined, says, "Gavin—"

"We'll see what we can do," Weathers repeats, to Ballinger this time.

They turn to leave, again, and again Roy stops them. "What about Paul?" he asks.

"Sorry?" says Ballinger.

"Paul," Roy says. "The other guy in the bar. He's got something to do with this— I'm sure of it."

Weathers and Ballinger share a look Roy can't really make out. "We'll look into it," says Weathers, and that's how Roy knows they won't.

The police leave, and Roy shuts the door behind them. He reaches down into his pocket and out comes the bear. It's tiny, and it fits cleanly in the palm of his creviced hand.

When Teresa had to evacuate with the rest of the health care workers some two weeks into the quarantine, she couldn't leave much in the way of medicine or supplies, because she didn't have any left, and she hadn't had enough notice to arrange anything. She'd come by for them every day for two weeks, covered head to toe in that crumpled plastic biohazard gear, face obscured by the plastic plate covering her face, like this was the moon and she was an astronaut.

But Roy could make out her eyes. She had friendly eyes, good eyes.

What she did leave, the only thing she could leave, was the bear, which she called, with a half-grin, a "priceless family heirloom." Good luck charm, something like that. Something to remember her by.

But the only thing it reminds him of is the fact that someone was there, someone who dropped into the borough to deal with the virus and stuck around to help with the cancer, someone who can't be there anymore because things got so much worse that no one could stick around no matter how much they wanted to. It's one thing to lose the things you count on—the girl you grew up with, married, made a life with; the bar where you bonded with your friends over beers; the borough you could count on being a good place to raise your little girl in. It's one thing to lose them all to something random like cancer, but something real different to have them, and their whole wide world, taken away from you.

Roy clutches the bear in his right hand and walks down the hall, into Becca's room. She's punching the buttons on a 3DS, which is running on the very last of the batteries. She doesn't notice him come in, but she'll notice all the time when her mom's not around anymore, and when her dad's the only person she can ever see or talk to and maybe the only person she'll ever see again. He thinks of his life, sneaking into the Market after-hours with the gang just to see if they could do it (not stealing anything more than a Hershey's bar as proof); first dates in junior high, more on a dare than on a whim; just hanging out on the streets and around the bar and having a life outside a home that can't be a home anymore when the most important part of it can't be around.

This house and this neighborhood are tradition, yeah, but tradition only goes so far. There was supposed to be more than this. Would have been, too, if not for Paul. There was a good amount of money to be made as assistant manager, a nice raise Roy'd earned, a nice raise he'd needed. When he'd come from work that day, he'd walked into the kitchen and sat down across from Trina, who was nursing a cup of orange juice, which was the strongest stuff she ever drank. She had a full head of hair then, but wouldn't for much longer. And Roy had to sit across from her and tell her, the extra money ain't coming. We'll have to pay for this another way. And we'll have to stay here, in this little apartment, in this little neighborhood, because without that extra income, with the cancer, there's no way we'll have the money to find a new place. A better place.

Outside the borough.

Roy'd been at the Pub one night with Kyle and the gang, and somehow the conversation got around to Muslims, and all the terrorist things guys like that do to take out good, American lives. And once Paul, who'd been sitting in the corner staring into his Kindle, walked out, Kyle turned the talk to him. "Guy like Paul," he says, "walks in here, total stranger, and takes work away from guys like us. Guys like Roy here. Kills off the lives we coulda had. Ain't that terrorism, in its own way?"

Roy looks at Becca now, lying on her too small, too worn, too dirty bed, and thinks it could have been different. Matter of fact, it should be different—even now. There are all kinds of things that take a man from point A to point B, but it all comes back to Paul, and



the raise and promotion Roy never got, the move that never happened. Paul's responsible for all of this, one way or another.

Roy won't bother Becca now—he goes instead to his room, where Trina's asleep. She's asleep a lot, tired a lot, and if she was to get better and stronger, it'd only be for a little while, until whatever is killing people out there makes its way in here. The reason people in this city keep guns is because, if something they've got is being stolen, you don't want to give it up without a fight.

Roy squeezes the bear tight and leaves the apartment, though not before grabbing the last of the beers from the refrigerator.



When Roy was first dating Trina, he'd knock on the door, then squeeze right up against the door, toward the left, so she couldn't see him through the eyehole and wouldn't know it was him. He does the same now against an obnoxiously bright blue door, and he waits.

The door clicks and opens inward, and Roy rolls in after it, pushing Paul back. Paul can't say a word before Roy punches him, hard, across the jaw, knocking him flat down onto the mint green carpet. Roy grabs him by the collar of the shirt and says, "Where is it?"

"Get off me!" says Paul as he throws his own fist against the crown of Roy's head, drawing a little trickle of blood. Roy reels back, and Paul stumbles to his feet, catching hold of himself on the dark brown table. "Get the hell out of my house," he coughs out.

"Give it back!" says Roy, charging, and Paul, still supported on the table, can do nothing more than watch the bull coming before finding himself bowled over and back on the floor. The back of Paul's head smacks down on the hardwood floor just where the rug ends, and he doesn't struggle much at all when Roy, still on top, launches his fist across Paul's jaw, again, again.

"Stop!" a voice cries, Ani's, and Roy turns to find himself looking down the barrel of a revolver that looks a lot like his own, and that feels completely wrong but there's nothing he can do about it. The woman, dark features more pronounced than her husband's, has tears falling from her eyes, and Roy, straddled atop Paul, just stares at the weapon for a moment.

"There's no bullets," he mutters. He wipes a bit of blood from the small cut on his forehead.

Ani opens her mouth, but what comes out is a choke, so she just nods.

"The cops . . ." says Roy.

"Haven't . . . come yet," mutters Paul, blinking hard and fast.

Roy puts his hands up and pushes himself off.



Ani lets the police officers in when they come. Paul, now seated on the easy chair, holds the gun on Roy, who's plopped down onto the couch, the bear bouncing around between his hands. When Weathers and Ballinger walk in, the first thing Roy does is turn to them and say, "You gave them my gun."

"What?" says Weathers. He notices what Paul's holding, and says, "It's not the same gun."

Ballinger walks, almost stomps, over to Paul and pulls the weapon from his hand. Paul looks up in protest, but Ballinger just turns away, punches the butt of the gun into her open palm, and shouts, "Goddammit!"

"Hey, Anne?" says Weathers.

"There are people," says Ballinger, "screwed up, sick-in-the-head used-to-be people, minds more fucked up than any drug could do, killing themselves and killing each other and spreading this thing around, and we gotta waste our time and waste our resources helping people like you? Damn it! And you wonder why we're confiscating the guns!"

Ballinger takes up the room the way Flower always does. Weathers shrinks away into a corner like a scolded child, and Roy just stares. Then Ballinger turns to Roy and pulls out her gun and aims it, right at him, and Roy hardly reacts, passing the bear from right hand to left hand, left to right. "We go out of our way to help you, and you waste our time. What if right now, one of these infected psychos breaks his way into your house and kills your wife and we couldn't stop it because you were . . ."

She breaks off, then walks over to Roy, reaches down, and pulls the bear from his hands.



"Hey!" says Roy.

"Get out of here," says Ballinger. "Go home."

Roy stands up and tries to stare her down. "Give it back!" he says.

She steadies the gun with both her hands, the bear poking out through her fingers. She looks at the gun and the bear, then looks at Weathers, who raises his hands in a calm-down kind of gesture, and Ballinger nods. "Take it," she says, flipping the bear back to Roy. "Take it and get the fuck out."

Roy pushes himself up off the couch, clutching the little bear tightly. As he heads for the door, Weathers mutters, "Blame doesn't matter." And he's wrong—it matters a lot—but Roy takes one last look around the apartment, no bigger than his own, at Paul's bloodied face and Ani's panicked eyes, and the cops who make the whole place seem way too crowded, and he thinks, maybe it's not enough.



"What's that?" asks Becca as Roy tugs the old black bag into his room. Becca and Trina are on the crumpled bed, in the middle of *Go Fish*, when Roy reaches down, picks up the cards, and starts piling them up.

"Suitcase," says Roy. "Fill it up. Only what you need."

"Dad?" says Becca, but he ignores her, instead opening up the drawers and throwing in the things he needs: some clothes, his jeans, underwear, socks—the basics. Just enough in case the border is more than a day's trip away.

"Roy, we can't—" says Trina.

"Flower can't keep this place together," says Roy. "Cops can't keep this place together. Ain't her fault. Ain't their fault."

"It's nobody's *fault*, Roy, it's—"

"It's somebody's *fault*," says Roy. "But we're getting through this, the three of us. We ain't defeated. If we stay here and wait for this thing, this plague, to find us and do us in . . ."

"Roy?"

". . . the *fault's* mine."