

JENN GIBBS

## THE WHISKEYJACK

Why Burt and Emma would be driving anywhere together, Lindsay can't understand. Her sister is supposed to be hundreds of miles away, doing a bird thing. Burt was running errands, he said. Back by noon.

The officers don't find it odd the two were together because Lindsay doesn't say they should. They Ma'am her and ask if there's someone she can call.

Who would she call if her husband was killed in a wreck? Her sister. Who if her sister, god forbid, died? Her husband.

Michael, Lindsay's son by another marriage, is in South America, traipsing a jungle after some brightly feathered creature that isn't a parrot. A message would reach him, but no telling when.

He would just repeat her question: "But *why*?"

She didn't even know Emma was in town.

An officer says, "Ma'am?"

"No one," Lindsay says.

"I think you should sit down." A blue-sleeved arm reaches out for her to catch. It is strong as a tree limb, an unexpected solidity in a world that is suddenly air. It guides her descent to the bench by the door. Burt's running shoes, caked with dried mud, tangle under her feet. They are a chronic source of irritation. The only time she likes them are when they are with Burt on a trail and she can eat something sweet without a jeremiad on the evils of refined sugar.

Henny from next door is here. She's nice but too churchy. Keeps her porch light off on Halloween and includes a "Jesus is King!" sort of card with her Christmas cookies. Although Henny is an excellent baker, Burt would avoid the frosted

crosses and wreaths. Carbs and food dye.

The wreaths Lindsay understands. Symbol of eternity, going round and round. Life, cyclical, evergreen. The crosses though. Are they really a suitable shape for cookies at all, let alone for celebration?

She thinks of Burt once saying, “Why not a tasty crown of thorns?” then laughing when Lindsay held up a wreath.

But Henny knows how to show officers out and how not to talk so you can stare at your husband’s sneakers. She can make tea without asking where things are. She can move you to the couch where you can stare at steam rising from a mug.

The phone rings and Henny answers. Words happen. Lindsay is in Henny’s Buick; it is like riding through town on a sofa. Familiar sights slide by, looking just a bit off. Like looking into a mirror and seeing your twin sister’s face.

In cases such as these, the coroner releases the remains to a licensed mortuary, Henny explains. They are walking up the steps of a wide wooden porch of a brick house. Giant tubs of hostas flank the door. Lindsay’s stomach lurches and she slaps a hand on the gold-lettered plaque to steady herself: Evanson’s Funeral Home.

“You can go with another funeral provider if you want,” Henny is assuring her just then. Lindsay thinks yes, provider, so much truer than “home.” Emma hates falsehoods: it’s one reason she liked animals. They can’t lie.

*Except, Emma might say, for the odd trickster...*

How many times had Lindsay heard Emma’s special dinner party lecture on birds that lay eggs in others’ nests? That steal?

*Cuckoos. Magpies. Jays.*

Why were they in Burt’s car?

Lindsay vomits in the hostas just as the door swings inward and a young man in a dark green suit greets them. Nothing in his expression implies he has noticed the mess in the plant. Henny presses a tissue into Lindsay's hand.

"She can't do this," Henny says. "Not today."

The young man says something. Lindsay doesn't care what it is. She's moving to sit on the steps.

Henny says, "I'm a neighbor. I knew them." Then she drops her tone, like a singer reaching for a low note: "Her twin."

More words. After a long time or a little, Lindsay couldn't say, she is back in the Buick with the not-right streets sliding by. On her lap, a white plastic sac with an image of the front of Evanson's in forest green. Inside, a box of Burt's wallet and mobile, his wedding ring. Papers from the glove compartment. Emma's mobile with her license and credit card tucked into the case, and necklace, a gold bird the size of a paperclip, wings spread sharp and wide. Lindsay gave it to Emma for finishing her doctorate. Emma wore it every day since, saying she'd be like a pirate, whose earrings could pay for a decent burial wherever he washed up.

Em had closed one eye, leaned close to Michael and said *Yarr*.

Michael's heart will break when he hears the news, Lindsay thinks.

Henny is saying, "Do you have a boyfriend or someone?"

Lindsay doesn't answer because it doesn't make sense. Henny talks some more, and still doesn't make sense. The bird in her hand, Emma and Burt gone, Emma and Burt together in the first place, the words Henny is saying. Lindsay shakes her head. *No. No. No.*

Lindsay wants quiet so she says she needs to be alone. Henny drives Lindsay to the door then around to her own driveway fifteen feet away. Lindsay goes inside, holding the box and the necklace. She also holds a business card for the funeral

place. Who put it into her hand? She lets it drop. She goes upstairs and showers then lies on the bed soaking wet.

She wakes wrapped in a damp blanket. Pieces of what Henny said fall from the dark air to form a strange notion. The neighbor thinks she, the woman who received five years' worth of Jesus cards, is Emma. And that she, Lindsay, died. Henny met Emma several times. How could she confuse them? They're twins, sure, but the differences—. Is the woman stone blind?

Lindsay will have to explain. Henny will be horrified.

But in the morning, Lindsay has things to do. Turning out Burt's pockets, for instance. The ones in his dresser and the ones in the closets and the ones waiting to be washed and the ones in the dryer and the ones in the basket waiting to be folded. The ones in his still-damp running shorts left rolled into a stinking ball on top of the washing machine.

Because why were he and Emma together?

Burt's wallet is the richest pocket so far: a mine of receipts and cards and a dry cleaning stub—as a manager he often wore suits. Yet no surprises there.

The funeral provider calls and forces her to think about the one-day-when conversations she's had with Emma and Burt. Emma would want the simplest route back to nature.

*Take what's left of me to the mountains. Let me go.*

Burt would hate being fed into the economic machine he called the Death Business. No embalming, no casket, no marbled vault. Yes to calling hours, if Lindsay wants them.

But she doesn't want them. When she thinks of the vast and scattered nebulae of friends and colleagues all speculating on why Burt and Emma died together, she knows she doesn't want services of any kind.

It's clear the young man thinks she's making a hasty decision—probably because it puts the least amount of money in his pocket, she thinks. But she needs an answer, not to waste time on this phone. She severs his demurrals with a credit card

number and emphatic instructions: “Cremation. Cardboard box. End of story.”

As she resumes the search by pulling up couch cushions—the spaces behind and between being pockets of a sort—it occurs to Lindsay that she may be in crisis. She has not dressed since her shower last night and though she is shivering, she cannot stop searching.

On the counter, in the box, an eagle cries, its scream speaking vast distance and altitude. Lindsay recognizes the ring tone, leaps to dig out Emma’s mobile phone, banging her shin on the way. The caller ID says Paul and shows a man in a baseball cap.

“Yo, Em. What the hell? You coming or not?”

It took Lindsay a couple of tries to make her voice work. “Who is this?”

“Ha-frigging-ha. Look, I know you did me a favor by letting me write you into the grant, but if you don’t spend at least some time with these yoo-haws, it’s bad for both of us.”

“I said I’d come?”

“Very funny. I am actually physically in Bozeman about to board my plane. You get your own cabin. I see my wife and kids. The fellows meet their goddamn hero. A dream come true all around.”

Emma was somebody’s hero? This might be a sort of pocket too.

“Hello?”

“Where I am I supposed to be?”

*“Check your email.”*

Lindsay feels pinched, the way she always does when someone is irritated with her. Even, evidently, when it’s not actually her. “There was a car accident. I’m sorry. But people died. I’m sorry.”

“Jesus—shit—I mean, are you alright?”

“My sister. And...Burt.” Something inside her heaves.

She can't take a breath.

"Look, if you can't come—"

Lindsay notices that she is naked and cold and curling around her sister's phone in a house both too familiar and too strange. The need to be someplace else seizes her. And not just any place—an Emma place.

"No. I'll be there on the afternoon flight."

They disconnect and Lindsay realizes what she needs now is clothes. Still holding Emma's phone, she hastens to the laundry room to scrounge something from the dryer before examining Emma's phone. It's an electronic pocket filled with other pockets. It will receive a call, but to make one, or do anything else, Lindsay must unlock it.

She tries B-I-R-D.

No.

*J-A-Y-S.*

Success. She and Emma never shared that freaky psychic link you sometimes hear about, but they understood each other well enough. Like that the world was sorted between them, with science competitions and ski racing belonging to Emma while Lindsay took voice lessons and performed in school plays. Emma traveled, collected degrees. Lindsay married, twice, and had Michael. And while Emma was sharp, angular—an instrument for taking things apart—Lindsay was the soft one. She thought of herself as glue, meant to hold things together, until Michael's father accused her of being too accommodating and found someone who would give him more trouble.

Is that why Emma was in Burt's car? Because Lindsay was too agreeable? Questions opened to questions. How often did Emma come to town without saying anything? Lindsay scrolls through the call history on Emma's phone. Most calls are to Lindsay's own phone or to names she doesn't recognize. Burt's appears only once. A short call, yesterday, twenty-two seconds.

What can two people say to each other in that little time?

*"I'm here. Gate 14."*

*"All right, all right. Keep your panties on."*

*"I don't wear panties."*

*"I know."*

Lindsay discovers a series of voice recordings. Plays the most recent one. Emma's voice flies out of the device, bright and quick, she is lecturing—who?

*Can anyone tell me what an accidental species is? No? Come on—it's just us.*

Murmuring laughter. A decent-sized crowd. Someone speaks, words indistinguishable.

*Yes, that's right. Out of normal range. With the Canada Jay, we're looking at boreal and subalpine coniferous—.*

Lindsay turns off the phone. She never has the energy for all the details: the habitats, the diets, the reasons why.

Except now, when she can think of nothing but why.

The phone chimes. Low battery. It's the same brand as Lindsay's so she plugs it into the wall with her charger. She'll call every number Emma has. Later.

First she must pack.

She pulls Burt's old backpack from a corner of the basement. Red desert dust still powders the seams. She stares at the fact of it. He can't be dead.

*But his wallet. His mobile.*

A man hit Burt on the head and stole his wallet and car. Right now, an amnesiac Burt staggers around a Costco parking lot. The cops are on their way to explain their mistake.

*Oh, Linds. Then what about me?*

Lindsay fingers the bird at her neck. She needs to see the bodies.

Upstairs she calls Evanson's. A woman's voice on the other end calmly informs her they will be pleased to accommodate her request then, a touch hastily, asks her to hold. Lindsay envisions someone just being stopped from scooting human shaped blurs

into a brick oven with a large, wooden spatula, like you see in fancy pizza joints. The voice returns.

“I’m so sorry, ma’am, but—”

Lindsay’s blood has turned to seltzer water. She can barely hear for the fizzing, but she catches the gist: Evanson’s is efficient.

“—you can pick them up this afternoon.”

During the plane ride, Emma’s phone talks Lindsay through another lecture—the recording stops abruptly, just when it’s getting informative. She tries reading a file attached to one of Paul’s many emails, and deduces that his project has something to do with Canada Jays or Gray Jays, she can’t tell which. When the plane lands in Helena, Lindsay uses the airport network to discover that a Canada Jay *is* a Gray Jay. In fact, the damn bird has many names. She scrolls through the list, feeling slightly dizzy and caught short, as if she’s missed a stair. When did she last eat?

A voice has been calling and she realizes it’s meant for her. “Dr. Auslander? Dr. Emmaline Auslander?”

A scrawny boy with a ginger beard far too large for his face is smiling and reaching out a hand for her to shake. “Brian Kenning,” he says. “Stoked to be working with you.”

She touches his hand and when it’s clear he isn’t going to take Burt’s pack, she hoists it onto her shoulders. The corner of one of the boxes—Burt’s or Em’s ashes—pokes the middle of her back. Outside, they hike a parking lot that seems impossibly large for such a small airport. When they finally reach a banged up SUV, Lindsay shrugs the pack so quickly, it smacks the pavement.

Brian lifts the pack easily and maneuvers it onto cases of toilet paper and beer. “Don’t get into town much.”

Lindsay murmurs, “Have to take the opportunity.” It’s



something Emma would say, though she'd finish with whatever fit the context: *To eat seafood. To sleep in a bed. To drink the good stuff.*

To cheat your sister?

*Don't think that, Linds. Look out the window.*

The field station is an hour's drive down one road, forty minutes down another, and an interminable stretch of bumpy dirt trail. They pass fields of tall grasses ringed by mountains blue and large, plunge into a fir forest, climb a pass. After Brian's initial attempts at conversation fail, he concentrates on driving, to Lindsay's relief. She has no idea what Emma would say to him.

The first time they switched was by accident. They were ten, visiting their grandparents. One morning, Pops handed Lindsay a pair of binoculars and put a finger to his lips. They crept out the back door and walked through the woods to the pond. They sat in grass and listened and looked for birds. Once in a while, he whispered names for what they saw. He pulled lemon cookies wrapped a napkin from his pocket which they ate in conspiratorial silence.

That was the first time she experienced herself as entirely separate from Emma. Filled with woods and a new sense of self, lemon-sweet crumbs still on her lips, she held Pop's hand all the way back to the house.

Inside, Emma and Grandma Vera were washing dishes. Muffins cooled on the counter.

Emma glared at Lindsay, who suddenly felt freedom as loss. Pops said, "Well, Emma here is a fine birdwatcher."

Emma and Lindsay locked eyes, but neither corrected his mistake. *Serves you right*, Emma smirked.

The next day, when Pops asked if Lindsay wanted to go again, Emma said, "Yes!" and he looked between the girls, momentarily confused, then left with Emma. Grandma Vera took Lindsay shopping. After that, the girls intentionally

switched places a few times, though it was harder to fool people with good eyesight. And of course, they outgrew the trick.

In Montana, time functions differently. Lindsay keeps expecting to pass a landmark sooner than they do as the broad, blue mountains don't seem to change. Then she turns her attention to the shocking blue sky, then finds they're at the mouth of another winding pass. She feels they've been traveling both forever and barely any time at all when they enter a sparse cluster of trees with scattered split log buildings. Brian parks on a gravel drive behind the largest—from the smell and clatter of dishes, she surmises it's the dining hall—and points her toward a tiny cabin near a ring of boulders. Inside, she drops the backpack and looks around. There's a miniature bathroom with the smallest shower stall she's ever seen. Someone—Paul, Lindsay supposes—left a sleeping bag on the upper bunk, and she realizes Emma would have brought her own. A black wood stove squats in one corner, a stack of split logs with sticks and newspapers to the side.

*Welcome home*, Emma says.

Because she doesn't know what else to do, she returns to the dining hall. Eight faces turn toward her when she enters the wide, low room. Two long tables sit side by side with bowls of food on a counter by a stack of dishes. A guy with a green cap hollers, "Whiskeyjack Girl!" Lindsay forces a smile and waves, then takes her meal to the opposite end of the room, where Brian happens to be.

Brian introduces the people at their table, but only Jessica's name sticks, mainly because her pinched expression and small nose make her look like a mouse and not because she's one of the research fellows Emma is supposed to supervise.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Auslander," Jessica says. "Paul told us. About your sister. And that you wouldn't want us to make a

thing out of it. Which I hope I haven't. I mean, I'm so terribly sorry."

Lindsay presses her lips together. She doesn't want to think of any of that. This is an Emma place, a pocket in the mountains where Emma might still be. Which, Lindsay is starting to understand, is why she's here.

She nods. Forces words. "Thank you."

If Jessica had whiskers, they'd be quivering. Clearly, she has more to say. Lindsay braces herself for the accusation.

"Would you—might you—look at my thesis while you're here?"

Lindsay, so relieved her smile is genuine, nods.

The sleeping bag reeks of wood smoke and unwashed hair, but it's necessary as the night turns cold and her fire keeps going out. She can also hear voices—researchers drinking at the firepit. When her alarm chimes at dawn, she turns it off and surrenders to a rock-heavy need for sleep.

At lunchtime, Brian is the only one in the dining hall, looking from a small, spiral-bound notebook splayed on the table to a laptop. Lindsay realizes everyone else must be in the field.

"You'll want to see this," he says, turning the laptop to show her the screen.

Lindsay climbs onto the bench beside him. Blinks at rows of numbers. She resorts to a tactic Burt used when he didn't understand something. "How about you walk me through it?"

"Well, we tagged the hatchlings last winter, of course. Since April, Jessica and I have been observing the juveniles, and it's getting interesting." Brian taps the screen. "Five of the eight family groups have expelled sibs. Jessica is following the leavers and I'm watching the stayers and the unbroken family groups."

Brian's beard flaps as he talks. A big flap of hair waving in

words. What would Emma say?

“So, what’s happening with them? With the, um, stayers?”

The beard stills as he clicks the computer keyboard. He points to the screen.

“As you know, I’m following up on your question about characteristics in dominant versus non-dominant sibs. Of course, remaining with parents and learning how to care for brood may be an evolutionary advantage, but are there predictive markers for the successful sibling? Aside from gender, of course.”

Lindsay feels Emma stir. Nudge. *Are there?*

“Are there?”

Brian flinches slightly. Looks at her sideways. “We won’t know until the territory disputes are worked out.”

“Of course.”

“Based on your work and Paul’s recent observations, we’ve coded for five traits: behavior during allofeeding, flight debut, evidence of caretaking behavior, size, and general aggression.”

Lindsay nods. It’s actually interesting, though she wants to know what “allofeeding” is before she says something else stupid.

“Jessica’s in Zone B today. Want to go?”

The way he asks the question it’s clear he expects her answer to be yes.

“Lead the way.”

He glances down at her bare legs. “I’ll grab your lunch while you gear up.”

Lindsay hears Emma snickering in her head. Of course. She has a photo of Emma posing like a showgirl, covered head to foot from her wide-brimmed hat to the long, pale pants tucked into hiking boots, and Lindsay herself shopped for Michael’s field clothes when he spent his first summer at Junior Biologist Camp: tan pants and a white, long-sleeved shirt. This is how Brian is dressed, with gaiters around the ankles and white streaks of sunscreen around his nose.

The best Lindsay can do is jeans and a long-sleeved tee. For sun protection she appropriates a grubby baseball cap from a peg in her cabin. She helps herself to bug spray sitting on a rock by the fire pit. Soon, she is trailing Brian through shoulder-high grass and aspen. It sounds like lapping waves, the friction of plants against their bodies, and she loses herself for a while in the idea that she's swimming. They climb through spruce and fir. It seems they'll never reach wherever they're going and then they stop. Brian's beard waves upward where a pair of hiking boots dangle in midair. A pale pinched face floats overhead.

"After you," Brian says.

Lindsay stares at the tree trunk, evaluating her options. She can tell Brian she twisted her ankle. Insist Jessica comes down. Or—

*Climb.*

Yes, that's another option.

Lindsay feels the bark of a branch scrape her palms and winces. Is this really what Emma would do? Her sneaker slides against the bark until it catches a knot on the trunk, the only foothold she can find. With Brian's attention amplifying every awkwardness, she pushes and pulls herself into a thicket of ladderlike branches. Out of breath and more than a little terrified, she reaches Jessica's perch—a plank set across a pair of branches and secured with lashes of rope. She takes a long pause, stymied by the physics of moving onto the plank from her position alongside it. Finally, she climbs higher then drops gracelessly to the board, making the whole tree shiver. A noise escapes Jessica, and when Lindsay looks over, the researcher is clutching her binoculars and notebook.

In a moment, Brian is there, lifting himself onto the plank as efficiently as a swimmer rising to the side of a pool.

*Well, at least I did it,* she tells Emma.

*You certainly did.*

They don't talk on the perch. Wind rolls across the tips of

trees then back. Brian taps her arm and hands her his binoculars. Another thing Emma would have. She looks through the lenses to see a smoke-gray mass about the size of a baseball swoop and fall from a high tree, dart skyward with impossible agility. Jessica writes in her notebook. Later, the older birds—not all gray, but partly white—appear, coming and going from some nexus in a neighboring pine. For something to do, Lindsay opens the sack lunch Brian obtained for her. The crackle of the paper bag gets a glance from Jessica. She feels Brian’s elbow in her ribs and thinks he wants her to put it away, but then she sees the juvenile Gray Jay hopping toward her. It is round and fearless, head tilting this way then that with every impish jump.

Brian pinches a corner from Lindsay’s sandwich and sets it on the plywood perch. The young bird swoops in and away in a graceful, silent flash, taking the crumb.

“Robber bird,” Jessica whispers.

“Camp bird,” Brian whispers.

“Moose bird.”

Lindsay gets the sense this is a game they’ve played before. She has the uncomfortable awareness that Emma would join in, but Lindsay has nothing to add. She feels like a sunbather trapped in the middle of a Frisbee game.

“Meat bird.”

“Venison bird.”

Any minute, words will smack Lindsay in the head. She tried to recall one of the bird’s many other names from her hasty research, then hears the voice of the man who greeted her last night, only now putting the two together. She says, “Whiskeyjack.”

Jessica says nothing for a moment. She’s staring through her binoculars. Then she drops them. Writing in her notebook, she whispers, “*Wasakajak*.”

Brian breathes, “Forest trickster spirit.”

*What am I doing?*

*Just watch. Listen. Smell. Be.*

*Be you?*

*Be.*

The wind rolls like ocean waves. Birds of various species come and go. Lindsay peers through Brian's binoculars, intrigued by how they flatten the world into planes, like a pop-up book. When she finds, entirely by luck, that she's gazing in-focus at a bird with a yellow head, satisfaction zings.

How many years did Emma do this? Totaling all the hours spent in trees or fields or marshes—how long? And what did Lindsay do? Sit at a desk, or drive to the dentist, or fill empty evenings watching TV with one husband then another.

What if Lindsay had spoken up that day with Pops? As an adult, she sees it would have been simple. Pops would've laughed and Grandma Vera would've teased him. Then they all would go watch the birds.

Would she and Em have ended up in such different territories?

The wind answers, its language both empty and full.

The next day, Lindsay forces herself up before dawn. The dining hall buzzes quietly—Jessica and Brian are there, also an entomologist and her assistant who evidently have a long hike to their own site. No one talks much except to thank a woman with two long, white braids who keeps making coffee. Lindsay comes to understand this is Ada, the station's caretaker, who sets out lunches with their first names scrawled on the side. Lindsay stares at the sacks a long moment. Brian reaches past her and picks up the one labeled *Emma*.

"Early mornings are a bitch, eh?" he says, placing it into her hands. She drops it into the day pack next to binoculars she found hanging in her cabin. The pack falls wrong on her back no matter what she does, but at least it holds the essentials: water, bug spray, lunch.

At the edge of the woods, Jessica plunges one way while Brian takes Lindsay another. Lindsay's legs ache from the day before—not just the hiking but the sitting too, she realizes. She gets the sense Brian is moving slowly for her sake.

“We’re going to a nest where the expulsion behavior is just beginning,” he says, holding a branch aside for Lindsay. “Three days ago, the chasing kicked in. I hope we haven’t missed the whole show.”

There’s a subtle reproach there, Lindsay thinks. Emma wouldn’t have slept in yesterday, and Brian could have done his own work, not simply take her to Jessica. She tries to imagine how Emma would feel. Would she be angry with Lindsay—with herself?

*Human, not robot.*

Emma, sometimes ruthless, sometimes kind. You never knew which you’d get.

They watch the nest from a rock overlooking a cluster of fir trees. The parents swoop off, leaving their solid gray children to chase and tease each other. It looks like play to Lindsay, but Brian’s whispered remarks make it clear these are acts of war. There’s an eighty percent chance that the siblings who are driven out will die before the year ends. A lucky few will be adopted by childless pairs in neighboring territories and from them learn enough about avoiding predators and securing food caches to survive winter. Lindsay feels anger, first at the birds that chase and peck, then at nature itself. She knows what Emma and Michael would say: she’s too soft, she’s anthropomorphizing. Nothing is ever fair.

*Death happens, Linds.*

By the end of the week, Lindsay is almost accustomed to waking in dark, collecting food from the dining hall, hiking out alone to sit and think, or sleep, and sometimes watch birds. She starts wishing she knew more of their names, understood their dramas. Gray Jays appear to her more vividly drawn than other



wildlife: sharp and clear and fascinating. She admires how one trio moves through the woods as a team, calling musically back and forth. She pulls meat from her sandwiches and leaves it on a stone to watch their silent dives, inquisitive head tilts. They take the meat, and fly away with it, bit by bit. She remembers a documentary Michael once made her watch. Monks in Tibet cut up corpses and toss the meat to the birds. Sky burial, they called it.

Sometimes she talks to Emma. Often, she weeps.

She can't, however, find anything to say to the Burt-shaped mass on her chest. She tries, but every word, every movement toward thought, snags on one question: should she hate him? Here, she doesn't need the answer. Here she feels she can return home and find him fixing his protein drink, or clearing the gutters, or planning their next excursion. Usually, their travels center on his marathons, but their last trip was to Lava Hot Springs. He'd pulled a hamstring and Lindsay remembers how his scowl of pain melted the longer he sat in the mineral baths until he could laugh with her about what a dump their hotel turned out to be.

Then she thinks of something to say.

"I want your muddy sneakers. I want your snarky comments. What the hell, Burt?"

Back to the question she can't answer.

Better to watch the birds, to count the number of insects she sees, to estimate the amount of time it takes for a slice of turkey to disappear. When the light on the treetops turns gold, she collects herself and walks back to the station. Brian and Jessica sit with her at dinner and she lets them talk through her, over her, around her, about what they saw, about sweethearts and postdoc prospects. She distracts herself by imagining they are two childless jays, and she's a tagalong from another nest.

At night, she stares into the fire with a bottle of beer in her hand while the same conversation from dinner wheels in

widening gyres as the geologists and entomologists and others join in. They know by now not to try to draw her in. She drinks her one beer and leaves the circle without saying a word.

After fifteen days, Lindsay sees Emma's face in the small bathroom mirror. Thinner, tanner than her own. She has given up the pretense of looking at Brian and Jessica's data or they've simply stopped showing her. Jessica hasn't produced the thesis either. Lindsay keeps rising before dawn, collects her lunch, learns where everyone is going and goes somewhere else. She knows this can't go on forever, but for now she watches clouds gather and part in a sky so deeply blue it seems outer space peers through it. Time, she thinks, is an illusion. Beyond the blue isn't heaven but everything. Emma and Burt are there, and so are Pops and Grandma Vera, and all the lives anyone might live. Watching the sky, Lindsay realizes it doesn't much matter why her husband and sister were in that car. It will bother her again later, she knows, when she is back inside the illusion. If only she could turn to dust right now on this rock, have the wind distribute her atoms like seeds.

One evening, Lindsay steps from the trees and hears a familiar voice cry out. She looks to see Michael, joy and anguish on his rugged face.

"Mom!"

She utters a piercing cry. Whatever of Em she had carried inside her rushed out to make room for gladness to see her dear, tall boy.

They hold, cling.

"Oh, you're here, you're here, you're here," she says, patting his face and his hair. She still has all that big blueness in her, and the wide wind, but she also has this. She presses her forehead to the hollow between his shoulder and chest, and he locks strong arms around her. They sway like trees bent by the

same wind.

“Brian called me on the sat phone,” he says after a while. He’s pulled back, holding her by the arms, examining her face. “I thought he had to be wrong. Oh, Mom.”

Lindsay looks at Brian who is observing them patiently, quietly, as if she’s a bird. Later she will sort out his minute hesitations, his kindnesses to identify the moment he must have known. Michael will tell her how he and Brian met years ago and kept in touch. Ornithology isn’t a very large world.

For now, she just buries her head against Michael’s broad, quaking shoulder.

The next morning, Lindsay takes Michael to the top of the windiest rock she knows and shakes the pulverized minerals that were once *E. Auslander* into a gust that sweeps them away. Mother and son settle onto the rock. He holds her hand, quietly watching and listening. Sometimes he cries, and she holds him close. Sometimes, he points to a creature crossing the air. Gives it a name. Makes her notice the shape of its wings and rhythm of its flight.

It occurs to Lindsay that she remains the nest to which he returns.

At the firepit, the researchers hand Lindsay and Michael cans of beer. The man who called Lindsay *Whiskeyjack Girl* tells them about the time he and Emma stole skinnydippers’ clothes and took prank photos with the field camera. Lindsay places the empty *E. Auslander* box on the fire and watches it turn to light and heat.

The next day, Michael drives Lindsay home in his rental car, Burt’s ashes on the back seat. Ada has packed each of

them a last lunch, with iced tea in their water bottles for their hangovers.

“No one has to know Aunt Emma was with him,” Michael says. He means Burt’s colleagues, friends.

“His cousin’s in Boise,” she says. “Alan something.”

“I’ll find him then.”

The wide valleys of Montana give over to Idaho then Utah.

Lindsay finally says, “Why were they in that car?”

“I don’t know, Mom, but I’m sure it wasn’t anything bad.” He drives several miles before he adds, “She didn’t even like Burt. I mean, she detested him.”

“Not detested,” Lindsay sighs. Leans her seat back. “But it makes no sense at all.”

“You’ll be okay, won’t you, Mom?”

“Of course.”

The fact is, she feels fine now, good even, with Michael here but she knows she’s in for it soon. Eventually, he’ll fly off again, as he should, and leave her with Burt’s sneakers. She’ll want to call Emma every day. She will ache for the rest of her life.

But for now, he’s here. She pats his shoulder then leans her head against the window to watch the dry hills turn drier.