

## When She Follows

On the eve of her eighteenth birthday, Louisa told Michael about what had really happened between Eric Lisbon and her. But he had probably always known. She wore a black sundress to Eric's funeral, which revealed a faded rainbow of bruises speckled across every inch of exposed skin. Having seen Louisa the night Eric had beaten her, Michael knew she was bruised down her forearms and shins from when she had pulled her limbs in to protect herself, but the marks on her wrists and about her throat had not been there when he took her home from River's Edge. She stood at the side of the grave, eyes completely dry, stone silent, but somehow managing to take away the attention from Eric's mother, Norma, drunk at her own son's ten a.m. funeral, hollering that he was a good-for-nothing ingrate. Makeup smeared all over her pasty face, and running from her bloodshot eyes, Norma tore at her snarled, badly dyed, orangish hair as they lowered Eric's coffin into the ground.

Old women standing in the church's basement bathroom after the funeral readjusted nylons of an unnatural bronze hue that barely concealed the purple ropes of veins winding up tree trunk calves. They met eyes in the dust-smudged, full-length mirror, and, after rehashing the gory details—"I seen plenty of suicides in my time, remember that rash of 'em five years ago after the third dry summer in row, but never a body rotting in the house for a week." "Gary hasn't spoken since he found Eric. Two policemen had to pull him off his son's body."—the conversation turned, "Did you see that Carson girl? You know her doctor father doesn't beat her. I don't mean to speak ill of the dead, but if that's what Eric did to his girlfriends, then good riddance." And maybe the whole town would have changed their view of Louisa as rich-girl-gone-bad if those

very same women hadn't lumbered upstairs and found Louisa standing right in front of the altar, of all places, in Michael's arms.

Louisa had glanced up, noticed the dull eyes of Elisa Williams and Penny Trot fixed on her, and kissed Michael squarely on the lips.

"What?" he sputtered, completely forgetting all his questions about the additional bruises. "What was that for?"

"Now I can be with you," Louisa told him, "'cause everyone's gonna say I was cheating on Eric with you anyway. Maybe that's why he killed himself." She said those last two words so flippantly and only much later did Michael realize they must have fought with the word murder all the way up her throat.

She didn't talk about Eric Lisbon or his death after that. When Michael tried to bring it up, she would shake her head and ask him to play her a song. She wouldn't let him teach her to play anymore though; it was too closely linked in her mind to her last fight with Eric. "I'm a listener," she told Michael every time he tried to put the guitar in her hands. "And maybe no one else in this town listens to you but I do."

To be fair, no one in Carlisle listened to Michael because, like the rest of his family, he didn't talk much. But Louisa pulled his voice from him, made him sing louder and write more songs, and that was the reason he fell in love with her. He only fell harder when he watched her with Molly's baby, Marissa. They had both been in the Parkers' kitchen when Marissa had taken her first step. Luke and Michael sat at the kitchen table, Marissa holding onto her father's knee, while Molly and Louisa kneeled side-by-side, a few feet away, in front of the avocado-green refrigerator, their bare legs pressed against the cornflower-patterned linoleum, arms outstretched, coaxing, "C'mon, 'Rissa, you can

do it. Come to Mama. Come to Aunt Louisa.” And when she toddled those few steps over to them, they both embraced her, lifting her up like she was a trophy. Michael added almost two years’ worth of those kinds of little moments together and he decided that he was going to ask Louisa to marry him on her eighteenth birthday. He wanted them to start a life together when she graduated high school in June.

The day before her birthday, he went to River’s Edge, the place he always went to think. He wanted to figure out the perfect thing to say to her. But when he pushed the side door open, flooding the place with violet-hued, evening light, and approached the stage from behind, he saw Louisa sitting on the edge of it. Just the sight of her—hair so pale it illuminated her head like a halo, shoulders curving so gently they appeared delicate even beneath her heavy leather jacket—brought sonnets to Michael’s tongue. Then every muscle in his body seized in panic when he got close enough to see the gun in her hands. Her hands were in her lap, but the barrel was pointed toward her, on an angle so, if fired, the bullet would collide with her face.

He started to say her name, but then froze, terrified of startling her and causing her to pull the trigger. But Louisa heard his strangled whisper. She turned the gun away from herself, and pointed it out into the cavernous room as if at some memory floating like a mirage in front of her. “This is the gun I killed Eric Lisbon with,” she said placidly.

Michael approached her slowly, shaking his head. “Eric killed himself, Louisa. You shouldn’t blame yourself for his suicide.”

Louisa let her arm drop, lowering the gun. “It wasn’t suicide, Michael. Molly and I just made it look that way. I shot him right in the head.” She said all of this without the

slightest waver. But she couldn't look at Michael, just stared at the gun. "I don't know how we got away with it. I should be in prison. I *deserve* to be in prison."

Michael sat down beside her. Her tightly drawn mouth and glassy eyes made her look twice her age. He slowly lifted his hand and placed it against the middle of her back, burying his fingers in the ends of her platinum hair. He spoke without thinking. "He deserved what he got after the way he beat you up in the parking lot that night. I could have killed him myself for that. I should have."

Louisa gazed at a point just beyond the gun, at the ghost of the boy who had been at the wrong end of it. "After you took me home that night, I went over to his house. It was a stupid thing to do. He was so drunk. A big whiskey drinker like his mother." Louisa gave a sharp little laugh that startled Michael like an unexpected clap of thunder. Tears spattered suddenly on Louisa's colorless cheeks. "But he'd been drinking like that for a while, so he wasn't a stumbling fool. He could still overpower me, which he did. With his big, calloused hand over my mouth, he dragged me downstairs to that disgusting little bathroom in his basement." Louisa's face crumpled like she tasted his sour skin all over again.

Michael's stomach sickened, rage that he had never felt before building up. The blood pounding in his eardrums almost drowned out Louisa's words, "And he raped me." His throat clamped around an infuriated cry.

A strange calm settled on Louisa's face after she said those words, the tears stopping almost as quickly as they had started. "He passed out afterwards. Right on top of me. I thought his weight would kill me. I almost let it. But I managed to get out from under him. I was in a total daze when I limped into the basement, over to his father's gun

collection. I picked up one of the handguns, stood there for what felt like hours with it pressed against my temple, but I couldn't fire. I called Molly instead, but he woke up, grabbed the phone away from me. And she was telling him that she was going to get Luke and Eric was telling her that... that he was going to do it again. I don't remember pulling the trigger, but I did."

She was silent for a moment, scrutinizing the gun. "I asked his mother for the gun," Louisa said simply, like she had asked for a cup of sugar. "A couple weeks after the funeral, she had me come over to the house and take whichever things of Eric's that I wanted. I grabbed a few t-shirts, things that a grieving girlfriend should cherish, and then I asked her about the gun, told her I wanted to destroy it. She handed it right over to me, saying she had no idea what to do with it herself. Of course, I destroyed his clothes instead and kept the gun. I've had it ever since and I can't tell you how many times I've almost used it on myself..."

Michael thought about those old women at the church after Eric's funeral, gaping at Louisa trying to find comfort in his arms. They had no idea that something so brutal could have happened in their little town, never even thought about, so they came up with other theories about the situation instead, and discussed them freely. They pictured Louisa in some field, seducing Michael while Eric sat alone in a basement with a gun to his head. Louisa was the outsider, after all; they would never imagine a local boy like Eric with his fingers around a girl's throat, tearing at her clothes, forcing his way inside of her. That was when Michael understood why Louisa hated Carlisle. And in that moment, he hated it, too.

Michael was the one who told Louisa to bury her pain and her guilt in Carlisle and leave it behind, run away. He said the magic word, *Chicago*, to make her stop thinking about Eric and most of all about using that gun on herself. He talked about it until she was so excited that she ran off to tell Molly, and to pack her beloved records so Molly could send them once she and Michael had a place. “Yes,” she agreed. “I’ll leave everything behind but you and my records. We’ll go to Chicago and get married!” It wasn’t how Michael had pictured his proposal would be—“Instead of suicide, marry me”—but it happened that way out of necessity. He loved Louisa and he would do anything he could to protect her.

Even though Michael hadn’t shared his thoughts about Carlisle with Louisa, about wishing women like Elisa Williams and Penny Trot would open their eyes and see what ugliness could happen in their quiet town, she was obviously thinking the same thing. After they made their historic exit out of Carlisle and had crossed the border into Illinois, Louisa leaned her head on Michael’s shoulder so she could make her voice heard over the whipping wind. “Can you stop at that gas station up there? I need to change.”

Michael dutifully pulled off of US-20 and up to a pump to fill the tank while Louisa ran around the side of the building into the ladies’ bathroom. He wasn’t sure what she was going to change into; all she had brought with her was a paper lunch bag that contained, as she told him, “300 dollars and my cigarettes.” Molly had boxes of Louisa’s records and Michael’s things ready to be shipped, but Louisa wanted nothing else of her old life, not even her clothes. She went into the bathroom with Michael’s backpack, and as he went inside to pay, he saw her strolling out. She smiled at him as they passed. She was dressed in his jeans, which hung low on her bare hips and a flannel of his, so worn

that he could see the outline of her nipples through the thin fabric. She slung his jacket over her shoulders. She wasn't carrying her clothes and Michael had a feeling they weren't in the backpack. She had probably left them strewn around the bathroom, her nylons dangling from the sink, dress in the middle of the floor, bra and panties dumped in the toilet bowl, and the gun in the center of it all, just waiting for a poor farmer's wife to walk in and stare wide-eyed, wondering what bad business had happened in the gas station bathroom in her simple town.

She confirmed, "I left the gun in there," when he found her sitting on a picnic bench just beyond the gas station parking lot. She had also taken his camera out. She handed it to him. "Take my picture so we'll always remember how I looked when you set me free." Louisa closed her eyes, squeezing out the last of her tears for Eric, and then opened them again, whispering, "I love you," right as he snapped the picture that would find a permanent home on the left stereo speaker in the living room.

Michael made himself believe that her eyes had never lost the glittering hopefulness they had in the photo, but, really, that façade crumbled soon after the picture was snapped. Then that image crept into her mind again, Eric's face collapsed inward like a rotten melon, and the gun abandoned in a roadside bathroom was still a ghostly weight in her hands. Behind the happy gleam in her green eyes when they were married just weeks after leaving Carlisle, and two years later when she held their little girl for the first time, memories of Eric played out. In fact, after Emily was born, the torment in Louisa's eyes became more apparent, but Michael tried to dismiss it as the fretting of a new mother.

Then one night Louisa awoke from a bad dream, sat straight up in bed, and moved fluidly through the darkened bedroom to open her dresser drawer and fling her things into one of the red suitcases her parents had given them as a wedding present for a honeymoon they had never taken. Of course, Michael couldn't see what she was doing, but he knew. "Lou?" he called out, his heart fluttering in his throat, beating out a little prayer of *not now, not now*. "What are you doing?"

She didn't respond, but after a moment the hard shell of the suitcase snapped together and the latches clicked. She carried it into the dim light of the hall and turned toward him, but her eyes swept over his head to the poster of the Chicago skyline above the bed. She was hastily dressed in the wrinkled clothes she had taken off that night, her hair knotted from uneasy sleep, and her face marked with a crease from the pillowcase. She rubbed one arm, then the other, like she was impatiently warming them.

"I gotta go, Michael. I'm sorry, but I'm no good for you and especially no good for her. The guilt's followed me here, and I have to get rid of it."

Michael's eyes shifted from Louisa to Emily sleeping in the crib to his right, urging Louisa's eyes to follow his, thinking that if she looked at their child, she would stay. But her flat, deadened eyes wouldn't focus on either of them, and she wouldn't even say Emily's name. He said it for her. "Emily," he whispered. Then, "I can't do this on my own, Louisa."

"You've got to. I cannot be the mother she deserves, or the wife you deserve."

"But what will I tell Emily when she's old enough to ask?" Michael finally managed to say, tears flowing into his mouth as the words exited. He could speak up in his daughter's defense, but not his own.

That was when he noticed Louisa crying, too, her eyes rimmed with red, face splotchy. She pushed her tangled blond hair behind her ear so roughly that she ripped out several diaphanous strands. “Tell her anything but the truth. That would be just as bad as me staying. Tell her a fairytale, tell her I left to follow rock ‘n roll. Let her think I’m a free spirit so she’ll have a free spirit. Or better yet, make her hate me. Tell her I ran off with another man. Let her know that you’re the good one. Let her hate me so much that I’m not a part of her. Make her yours, Michael, just yours.”

“But she’s yours, too. I can’t lie to her, Louisa.”

Louisa’s eyes were desperate, and she wrapped her arms tightly around her own skinny frame. “Michael, if you love me, you’ll keep my secret. I know you want to erase it, but you can’t do that for me. It will never stop haunting me, but it doesn’t have to haunt her. Promise me you won’t let this ugliness get passed on to her. Promise me you won’t tell her.” She rocked herself and closed her eyes. “Please.”

When Michael let the words, “I promise,” scrape out of his raw throat, he knew that in giving his wife that small relief, he had betrayed his daughter, centering her life around a lie. After giving Louisa those two little words, he didn’t have the voice left to give her the goodbye she wanted, that she had begged for by repeating, “Goodbye, Michael,” twice before walking out the door. The only pieces of their married life she took with her were the one red suitcase, her wedding ring, and the car. He hoped she wouldn’t cast those things off at a gas station somewhere, and he hated himself for suggesting they come to Chicago in the first place. In doing that, he realized, he had said to her, *when it hurts too much, just run.*

Michael stayed rooted in the spot Louisa left him in, not sleeping, letting the tears drip down his face until they dried. Dreary dawn filtered through the white curtains, and Emily started to cry. The sound roused him automatically. He rocked his baby, fed her, changed her diaper, and was motivated to keep moving, keep living, because Emily was more important than anything else. But Michael's mother didn't seem to think he had enough to give, or else she knew that his continued devotion to Louisa would eventually cost him Emily.

When Michael returned to Carlisle without Louisa, he ventured over to his parents' house after spending the first night at Molly's and Luke's. Though his mother was a quiet, rarely expressive woman, Michael had expected her to smile and coo at her first grandchild. Instead, she didn't even blink, just said, "I wondered when you were gonna show up." Then, she held out her hand for Emily's car seat. "Hand her over," she stated without any affection in her voice. Michael figured this was just her pent-up disappointment in him for leaving, getting married, and having this child so far from where his family had been doing those things for generations. Proud of his sweet little girl, he knew Emily would open her brilliant emerald eyes and his mother would be wooed into cracking a smile.

"She's an angel, isn't she?" he said, tenderly passing her the car seat.

When his mother looked down at the baby, her mouth puckered, and she stated stiffly, "She looks like her mother." Then, she sniffed. "Don't matter though, she's still a Black, and that's how she'll be raised. She'll be a good girl." Michael, intent on watching the flicker of a smile he thought he saw cross his mother's lips, missed her implication until she was more specific. "I got your sister Laura's room all set up for her. She's in

college now, you know, in Madison, so she won't be home much. And when she is, she can have your old room. I figure the baby's a girl, she ought to have a girl's room."

Michael's neck muscles tensed as his head snapped up, his eyes moving from his daughter's sleeping face to his mother's, which bore no trace of a smile, no luster in her amber eyes, just the same focused expression she wore when she milked, planted, cooked, cleaned, the expression that never changed except for the lines slowly deepening around it. "What are you talking about?" Michael asked, a bite coming into his voice.

"I'm talking about where your daughter'll be if you want to see her."

Michael shifted uncomfortably, the floor squeaking beneath his black boots. "Want to see her? She's gonna be living with me. If you want us to stay a little while..."

His mother pressed her free hand on her hip. "Michael, I don't think you get it. You're twenty-one. You made a mistake, but fortunately the mistake left you while you're young so you got a shot to set things right. No one's gonna expect a twenty-one year old man to raise a baby, so your dad and I, we'll take care of her. When you get remarried, if you want her back..."

Rage scorched Michael's face, eyes darkening and lips twisting into a scowl. "What the hell are you talking about? I brought her over so you could meet her, not so you could take her. I'll raise my own child." Michael's hand shot out to seize the car seat, but his mother set it down behind her with one hand and grabbed Michael's hand with the other.

She studied the gold band he was still wearing on his ring finger. "Michael, what are you doing to yourself?" she murmured.

“Mama, I’m just gonna take Emily back to the Parkers’, and you and I can talk later this week, ok? This is a confusing time.”

“Nothing’s confusing,” she glowered. “Your wife left you. Take the damn ring off, and move on with your life. She wasn’t any good for you in the first place.” Her fingers slid around the gold band and tugged.

“MOM!” Michael tried yanking his hand back, but her grip on the ring was tight, so she ended up with it between her fingers. The baby whimpered behind her. Michael clenched and unclenched his hands. “Please give that back to me,” he said, trying to look around her at Emily.

His mother blocked his view, her jaw locked in unswerving determination. “Michael, I know this hurts now, but you are going to thank me in a few years. I want you to walk away and start your life over. Get that woman out of your system.”

“Louisa is my wife, and Emily is my daughter. Now give me my damn ring and my kid!” Michael bellowed, perspiring in his heavy, navy blue winter coat.

Her forehead wrinkled as she studied the gold band in her palm before shoving it deep into a pocket. She pleaded with her son, brown eyes opened as wide as they went. “Michael, she left you. This baby needs a mama. I’ll stand in till you find a good one for her. You sowed your wild oats, now you’re gonna find yourself a good woman.”

“I have a good woman and you’re gonna feel terrible for saying that when she comes back.” Michael stomped his foot, knowing he was beginning to look like a pouting child.

His mother regarded him with pity. “Mikey, she’s not coming back....”

“You don’t know that! Nobody in this town knows anything about her or why she left,” he blustered.

“Ok,” she said patiently, “tell me why she left.”

But Michael hadn’t been able to. His gaze fell to the floor and he rubbed his hands on his jeans. “She had her reasons. She’s got stuff to sort through, and when she does, she’ll be back.”

His mother shook her head. “Don’t do this to yourself, Michael. Don’t do this to this child.”

She was still blocking Michael’s view of Emily, the gray apron covering her stocky body made her look like a concrete wall between them. Panic rose in Michael’s chest, burning his insides where Louisa’s leaving had numbed them. “You cannot take my child from me.” He gritted his teeth. “She’s everything....” Tears threatened to spill.

His mother looked down at the ring she held between her fingers. Then her head snapped up, her blazing brown eyes meeting Michael’s nearly identical eyes.

“Goddamnit, Michael,” she swore quietly, uncharacteristically. “I’m trying to protect you. If you hang on to Louisa’s memory like this, you are going to lose your daughter. You’ll be raising her with a ghost and then this little one’s gonna grow up and go chasing her. It’s going to break your heart a million times worse when she follows her mother.”

Though her expression had softened, anger still simmered in Michael’s eyes. “So, what? I’m supposed to give her up, go find her a new mommy, and then pretend....”

Michael’s voice cracked. He furiously swiped at the tears that came uncontrollably. “No. No. Give me back my baby—and my ring.”

So Michael's mother relented silently. She let the wedding ring clatter to the wooden floor and stepped out from between Michael and Emily, leaving the room. Michael lifted the wailing child out of her carrier, pressing her against his chest and supporting her with his right arm. Then, he put his finger through the ring, slid it back on, picked up Emily's empty car seat, and walked out of his parents' house for the last time. Without a connection to his parents and sisters, or to their husbands and children, family for Michael became something small and patched together. He and Emily were at the center, stitched to Molly and Luke's equally isolated family, with Louisa's parents connected by telephone lines, and Louisa out there somewhere, circling like a distant moon.