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UPMARKET THRILLER NOVEL EXCERPT: *HOME IS WHERE YOU GO* BY NANCY WEBB

Susan-critique

*Summary: Coral Watson returns home to her Texas ranch forty years after the tragedy that forever changed the lives of those who survived. When long-buried secrets lead to finding a body on the ranch, Coral and her sister Amber are swept up in a vortex of international conspiracy.*

PROLOGUE

Southwest Texas, January, 1976

Comment [s1]: I LOVE prologues, but a lot of agents don't, and a lot of people don't read them (I have no idea why; I don't think people know what they are and I know this because I ask people. Strange.).

"Jackalopes are calling!" Gray yelled as he reached inside the barn door and grabbed a rope looped over a post. He exited in a flash of red and jeans and mud-choked boots. The legendary jackrabbit with deer antlers was ~~the kids'~~ their most sought-after trophy.

Comment [s2]: good

Comment [s3]: Writing "the kids" makes it sound like the narrator is telling the reader, not Gray

"Hey! Y'all headed out?" Hank Watson called to his son. Shaking the last of the oats into the horse trough, Hank scratched Buttermilk's forelock. ~~T and~~ the big buckskin tossed her head, halter chain jangling, demanding her master continue their breakfast ritual.

Knocking hay off his boots and khaki trousers, Hank buttoned his canvas jacket against the wind. He walked through the mud and mist, hopscotching puddles.

Stepping into the trailer shed—a lean-to on the south side of the barn that glowed sepia-toned in a yellow bug light—Hank pushed his cowboy hat back and combed his fingers through his dark straight hair. He paused, a grin softening his rugged features as he watched his stair-stepped, tow-headed children scurrying around, loading the olive drab Jeep. At sixteen, fifteen, and fourteen, Gray, Coral, and Amber looked like uneven triplets. All wore Santa's recent gifts of

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matching hunting jackets—blue denim with tan corduroy collars and red-plaid blanket linings—that accentuated their similarities.

Gray, first-born and tallest, topped out at just below six feet, a "tall drink of water" as the saying went, with baby Amber a bit past five feet, and Coral in between. Each with pale hair, thick and wavy: Gray's buff and outlaw long, in his father's opinion; Coral's **pulled back in a sleek honey ponytail**; and Amber's banana-puddin' pageboy, with bangs that refused to lie flat. Eyes of blue gradations, **identified by their watercolor painter-mother**: azure, hyacinth, and cerulean—**their watercolor painter-mother loved to use exact color names**. But it was in their faces where each child's individuality showed. Gray, **like his father, with straight nose and chiseled cheekbones**; Coral soft and tulip-like, **reaching upward**; Amber round like the moon with **secret unexplored depths**.

Comment [s4]: I'm a fan of serial commas, especially here, where it allows the reader to pause between what each child looks like.

Leaning across the Jeep, Gray slipped his .30-06 into the scabbard on the passenger side near the gearshift, **while** Coral took her little sister's shotgun and tucked it with her own on a piece of old rug between the front seats. The girls climbed through the open sides and into the back, avoiding the roll bar, a curved pipe just behind the front seats that Hank had welded to his Army surplus Willys Jeep, **his tinkering toy**. The spare tire centered above the rear bumper arced like a blackened moonrise.

Comment [s5]: Summarize into a few words—too much description for the beginning of a book

Thunderstorms had passed, but clouds hovered; sunrise, still more than an hour away, played an unknown hand. Hank buttoned his jacket against the lingering gusts from last night's blue norther that raced across his River Road Ranch dropping the temperature to the mid forties.

Comment [s6]: Necessary?

Comment [s7]: Need to know at the very beginning of the story—I've pictured it daylight up to here

Comment [s8]: Foreshadowing? Seems misplaced if it is no mention of it before this—I would delete.

Comment [s9]: Pick one of two expressions—sentence too long

"Well, happy 'last day of deer season,' kids! Y'all gonna get that wily buck been hiding out by the river?"

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"Sure, him and a mess of jackalopes," Gray laughed. "But Big Rack don't want to be taken. You ought to know, missing him last time."

"Doesn't want to be taken," Amber corrected from the back seat.

"Daddy didn't miss him," Coral said in defense, "his rifle locked up."

"Locked up from buck fever!" Gray punched his father's arm, grinning. "The old man ain't got it no more."

"Anymore! Anymore!" Amber chanted.

"Amber! Pipe down!" Hank shook his head. Amber showing off. Always got to be center of attention. Little Miss Narciss, ~~he and her mother~~ they called her, in private, ~~sometimes called~~ her.

[section cut]

Comment [s10]: ?

Stepping back, Hank motioned toward the lane and the southern half of the family's almost-thirteen hundred acres on the north bank of the Nueces River some sixty miles from the border with Mexico. "Y'all go have fun. I'll get the pit ready to barbecue those jackalopes when you get back. Now be sure to get a turkey for your mother."

"Wait!" The back screen door slammed. Ophelia Watson, her shock of blond curls tied back, ran down the steps through the porch light circle and out the yard fence gate. "You forgot your Thermos and snacks!" Her golden banty rooster swaggered out of her way with a complaining cackle as Ophelia ran to the shed, her blue velour robe reaching to her muck boots. She handed a paper sack to Coral, who stashed it on the back floorboard.

good verbs, description

Ophelia gave good-bye kisses all around, ~~and~~ with one last reminder to the kids to close the pasture gates so the cattle wouldn't roam. ~~Hank stepped back.~~ Arms interlinked, the parents called in unison, "Good luck!" and "Be careful!"

Comment [s11]: I can't picture this-maybe have Ophelia hand it over and step next to Hank. Then he takes her arm.

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Gray turned on the headlights and backed out of the shed.

[section cut]

Following the two-track lane—hacked through thick mesquite and cactus—that paralleled the river, Gray cut the engine downwind from the Jackalope Ambush Stands, the kids' name for their deer and hog hunting spot. About a quarter mile south in the pecan bottom, wild turkeys roosted on the bank of the river. ~~The girls, as instructed, would wait until Gray shot, then sneak through the brush to the river and take their shots.~~ → addressed in next paragraph

Comment [s12]: Awkward-reword

"~~Now wait five minutes after I fire,~~" Gray whispered as-after he cut the engine. "I'll probably take him down with my first shot, but you girls wait until five minutes after I fire. Count to sixty five times before you start out. And be quiet."

Coral nodded and mouthed, "We will."

"I'll use my watch," Amber whispered back. "That's why I'm wearing it, stupid."

"Whatever," Gray mumbled.

"You be careful, Gray," Coral said softly. "And here, wear my cap. Your cowboy hat is too dull for walking through the woods."

"Deer are colorblind," Amber informed her brother and sister, who ignored her enlightened wisdom.

Switching hats, Gray smiled and whispered, "Thanks. Nobody shoot at what you can't see real clear. Now load up."

A dark still mist swaddled the Jeep. No birds called, no game or varmints ventured through the underbrush. Twilight lightened the cloud cover; sunrise would come at 7:30, if at all. The kids had a while to sit and wait, girls in the Jeep and Gray in his deer stand.

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Amber wriggled around and found a kneeling position on the back seat. Coral removed her gloves and pulled the matching Remington twelve-gauge double barrel shotguns from between the seats. She handed one to her sister. Breaking the barrel, Amber inserted a brass-and-green No. 5 lead-shot shell into each chamber and lifted her gun back up.

Gray, reaching to pull his rifle from the scabbard, scooted toward the passenger side and leaned across the gearshift mound. As usual, the scope hung. He stretched and raised up to loosen the gun without messing up his scope and precise sighting, issuing a few whispered curse words as he worked the shoulder stock back and forth with care.

Standing behind the driver's seat, Coral broke the shotgun across her left arm, letting the barrel fall toward the outside of the Jeep. She pulled a pair of shells from the half dozen stashed in her jacket pocket and let them slip into the chambers. Snapping the barrel to the locked position, she shifted the gun to her right forearm. ~~R-and-~~reaching up, Coral pushed back Gray's cowboy hat that had inched down on her forehead.

**Comment [s13]:** This is where I need to understand the exact position of the gun, so that when it slips, I can picture how it could've shot through the seat.

From next to her, Amber whispered, "I'm ready."

Coral felt her shotgun slip. Her feet rose from the floorboard as the world exploded.

Her shotgun hit the roll bar. The world exploded again. Brush vibrated with beating bird wings and panicked wildlife, the blasts replaced by screeching warnings. Frantic shrieks and screams reverberated through the mist.

A jackalope paused; ~~Coral saw~~ in a clump of prickly pear beside the Jeep.

Gray lay across the front seats. His head—blond hair, brains, bits of bone—covered the dashboard with red and yellow. The folded windshield, tray-like, held an array of color and mass that disappeared onto the hood and into the dark.

**Comment [s14]:** I tried hard, but I honestly could not picture how this could've happened. I think you need to be super accurate in terms of where the shotgun is pointing before it goes off. See my previous comment.

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An odor of gunpowder and a life stench/death stench filled Coral's nose, permeating her entire body.

*start here w/ her reaction* (Coral's legs locked as she stared down at her brother's form draped across the seats. His hands clasped the gun's stock, now loosened from the scabbard but hanging part way. His boots freed of the clutch pedal caught the side of the Jeep and his blue denim shoulders reached the far side of the passenger seat.

And there he stopped.

He had no head, just pulsing squirts of blood landing somewhere unseen on the running board and muddy loam beneath the Jeep.

Where's my cap? Coral thought.

Amber huddled in the far corner of the back seat, clutching her shotgun, ~~eringing;~~ trembling. ~~h.~~ Her knees were pulled to her chest. ~~H~~er blue eyes glowed bright circles in the darkness, made darker by the spare tire's dawn-shadow. ~~She stared at the back of the passenger seat. She seemed to grow in size as she raised her shoulders; her head rotated, h~~er vision moved across the dripping dashboard, ~~then~~ down the outside line of the seat to the sideways streams of blood on the running board.

She turned and looked directly into Coral's eyes. In a voice both frigid and lethal, Amber said, "You shot Gray."

[Prologue continues]

Good writing and start to your story. After Gray is shot, think about Coral being in shock and how much would really register in those first moments.

Comment [s15]: Too formal-maybe move it or reword.

Comment [s16]: Misplaced modifier-reads like the gun's stock is hanging part way, not his hand. I had to read twice.

Comment [s17]: Maybe too much detail-I'd delete first part of sentence, or reword. She's not going to notice all of these details at first-she'll be in shock-total disbelief

# Jenn's Comments

UPMARKET THRILLER NOVEL EXCERPT: *HOME IS WHERE YOU GO* BY NANCY WEBB

Formatted: Indent: First line: 0"

*Summary: Coral Watson returns home to her Texas ranch forty years after the tragedy death that forever changed her family, the lives of those who survived. When long-buried secrets lead to finding a body on the ranch, Coral and her sister Amber are swept up in a vortex of international conspiracy.*

## PROLOGUE

Southwest Texas, January, 1976

Be careful.  
Know why it's a  
prologue and  
not chapter one.

"Jackalopes are calling!" Gray yelled as he reached inside the barn door and grabbed a rope looped over a post. He exited in a flash of red and jeans and mud-choked boots. The legendary jackrabbit with deer antlers was the kids' most sought-after trophy.

Comment [PHS 1S1]: If this is Coral's story then perhaps start with Coral.

Comment [PHS 1S2]: Nice imagery ✓

"Hey! Y'all headed out?" Hank Watson called to his son. Shaking the last of the oats into the horse trough, Hank scratched Buttermilk's forelock, and the big buckskin tossed her head, halter chain jangling, demanding her master continue their breakfast ritual.

Knocking hay off his boots and khaki trousers, Hank buttoned his canvas jacket against the wind. He walked through the mud and mist hopperscotching puddles.

Comment [PHS 1S3]: Nice! ✓

Stepping into the trailer shed—a lean-to on the south side of the barn that glowed sepia-toned in a yellow bug light—Hank pushed his cowboy hat back and combed his fingers through his dark straight hair. He paused, a grin softening his rugged features as he watched his stair-stepped, low-headed children scurrying around loading the olive drab Jeep. At sixteen, fifteen, and fourteen, Gray, Coral, and Amber looked like uneven triplets. All wore Santa's recent

Comment [PHS 1S4]: This doesn't belong here. It confuses the sentence.

Comment [PHS 1S5]: No hyphen, one word.

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gifts of matching hunting jackets—blue denim with tan corduroy collars and red-plaid blanket linings—that accentuated their similarities.

Gray, first-born and tallest, topped out at just below six feet, a "tall drink of water" as the saying went, with baby Amber a bit past five feet and Coral in between. Each with pale hair, thick and wavy: Gray's buff and outlaw long, in his father's opinion; Coral's sleek honey ponytail; and Amber's banana-puddin' pageboy with bangs that refused to lie flat. Eyes of blue gradations: azure, hyacinth, and cerulean—their watercolor painter-mother loved to use exact color names. But it was in their faces where each child's individuality showed. Gray like his father with straight nose and chiseled cheekbones; Coral soft and tulip-like, reaching upward; Amber round like the moon with secret unexplored depths.

Leaning across the Jeep, Gray slipped his .30-06 into the scabbard on the passenger side near the gearshift while Coral took her little sister's shotgun and tucked it with her own on a piece of old rug between the front seats. The girls climbed through the open sides and into the back avoiding the roll bar, a curved pipe just behind the front seats that Hank had welded to his Army surplus Willys Jeep, his tinkering-toy. The spare tire centered above the rear bumper arced like a blackened moonrise.

Thunderstorms had passed, but clouds hovered; sunrise, still more than an hour away, played an unknown hand. Hank buttoned his jacket against the lingering gusts from last night's blue norther that raced across his River Road Ranch dropping the temperature to the mid forties.

"Well, happy 'last day of deer season,' kids! Y'all gonna get that wily buck been hiding out by the river?"

"Sure, him and a mess of jackalopes," Gray laughed. "But Big Rack don't want to be taken. You ought to know, missing him last time."

Comment [PHS 1S6]: hyphenate

Comment [PHS 1S7]: You already said this when you said they wear towheaded above.

Comment [PHS 1S8]: Nice! ✓

Comment [PHS 1S9]: This whole paragraph is beautiful but it slows the story down. I'm a page in and there is no story yet. Just description.

Comment [PHS 1S10]: Beautifully written but too much play-by-play. Slows story down. But add some foreshadowing here to make the reader tense. Maybe the Dad reminds them about some gun safety rule as he hands them the box of shells.

Comment [PHS 1S11]: He already buttoned his jacket on the previous page.



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"Doesn't want to be taken," Amber corrected from the back seat.

"Daddy didn't miss him," Coral said in defense, "his rifle locked up."

"Locked up from buck fever!" ~~Grinning~~, Gray punched his father's arm, ~~grinning~~. "The old man ain't got it no more."

"Anymore! Anymore!" Amber chanted.

"Amber! Pipe down!" Hank shook his head. ~~Amber showing off. Always got to be center of attention.~~ Little Miss Narciss he and her mother, in private, sometimes called her.

[section cut]

Stepping back, Hank motioned toward the lane and the southern half of the family's ~~almost~~ thirteen hundred acres on the north bank of the Nueces River some sixty miles from the border with Mexico. "Y'all go have fun. I'll get the pit ready to barbecue those jackalopes when you get back. Now be sure to get a turkey for your mother."

"Wait!" The back screen door slammed. Ophelia Watson, her shock of blonde curls tied back, ran down the steps through the porch light circle and out the yard fence gate. "You forgot your Thermos and snacks!" Her golden banty rooster swaggered out of her way with a complaining cackle as Ophelia ran ~~toward them the shed~~, her blue velour robe reaching to her muck boots. She handed a paper sack to Coral, who stashed it on the back floorboard.

Ophelia gave good-bye kisses all around, ~~and~~ <sup>with</sup> one last reminder to the kids to close the pasture gates so the cattle wouldn't roam, Hank stepped back. Arms interlinked, the parents called in unison, "Good luck!" and "Be careful!" Gray turned on the headlights and backed out of the shed.

[section cut]

Comment [PHS 1512]: Is this Hank thinking or the narrator talking? If inner thoughts then italicize.

Nice image!

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They followed the two-track lane—hacked through thick mesquite and cactus—that paralleled the river. Gray cut the engine downwind from the Jackalope Ambush Stands, the kids' name for their deer and hog hunting spot. About a quarter mile south in the pecan bottom, wild turkeys roosted on the bank of the river. The girls, as instructed, would wait until Gray shot, then sneak through the brush to the river and take their shots.

"Now wait five minutes after I fire," Gray whispered as he cut the engine. "I'll probably take him down with my first shot, but you girls wait. Count to sixty five times before you start out. And be quiet."

Coral nodded and mouthed, "We will."

"I'll use my watch." Amber whispered back. "That's why I'm wearing it, stupid." "I'm wearing a watch, stupid." Amber whispered.

"Whatever," Gray mumbled.

"You be careful, Gray," Coral said softly. "And here, wear my cap. Your cowboy hat is too dull for walking through the woods."

"Deer are colorblind," Amber informed her brother and sister, who ignored her enlightened wisdom.

Switching hats, Gray smiled and whispered, "Thanks. Nobody shoot at what you can't see real clear. Now load up."

A dark still mist swaddled the Jeep. No birds called, no game or varmints ventured through the underbrush. Twilight Dawn lightened the cloud cover; sunrise would come at 7:30, if at all. The kids had a while to sit and wait, girls in the Jeep and Gray in his deer stand.

Amber wriggled around and found into a kneeling position on the back seat. Coral removed her gloves and pulled the matching Remington twelve-gauge double barrel shotguns

birds fly away later when the sun goes off. Are they really silent now?

Comment [PHS IS13]: Why would sunrise not come?

Comment [PHS IS14]: double-barreled

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from between the seats. She handed one to her sister. Breaking the barrel, Amber inserted a brass-and-green No. 5 lead-shot shell into each chamber and lifted her gun back up.

Gray, reaching to pull his rifle from the scabbard, scooted ~~toward the passenger side and~~ ~~leaned across the gearshift mound.~~ As usual, the scope hung. He stretched ~~and raised up~~ to loosen the gun without messing up his scope and precise sighting, issuing a few whispered curse words as he worked the shoulder stock back and forth with care.

Standing behind the driver's seat, Coral broke the shotgun across her left arm, letting the barrel fall toward the outside of the Jeep. She pulled a pair of shells from the half dozen stashed in her jacket pocket and let them slip into the chambers. Snapping the barrel to the locked position, she shifted the gun to her right forearm and reaching up, Coral pushed back ~~the Gray's~~ cowboy hat that had inched down on her forehead.

From next to her Amber whispered, "I'm ready."

*Coral's shotgun slipped.*  
~~Coral felt her shotgun slip.~~ Her feet rose from the floorboard as the world exploded.

Her shotgun hit the roll bar. The world exploded again. Brush vibrated with beating bird wings and panicked wildlife, the blasts replaced by screeching warnings. Frantic shrieks and screams reverberated through the mist.

A jackalope paused. ~~Coral saw,~~ in a clump of prickly pear beside the Jeep.

Gray lay across the front seats. His head—blond hair, brains, bits of bone—covered the dashboard with red and yellow. The folded windshield, tray-like, held an array of color and mass that disappeared onto the hood and into the dark. An odor of gunpowder and a life stench/death stench filled Coral's nose, permeating her entire body.

Coral's legs locked as she stared down at her brother's form draped across the seats. His hands clasped the gun's stock, now loosened from the scabbard ~~but hanging part way.~~ His boots

Comment [PHS IS15]: I thought he was in the deer stand?

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freed of the clutch pedal caught the side of the Jeep and his blue denim shoulders reached the far side of the passenger seat. And there he stopped. He had no head, just pulsing squirts of blood landing somewhere unseen on the running board and muddy loam beneath the Jeep.

|Where's my cap? Coral thought|

Amber huddled in the far corner of the back seat clutching her shotgun, cringing, trembling. Her knees were pulled to her chest; her blue eyes glowed bright circles in the darkness made darker by the spare tire's dawn-shadow. She stared at the back of the passenger seat. She seemed to grow in size as she raised her shoulders; her head rotated, her vision moved across the dripping dashboard then down the outside line of the seat to the sideways streams of blood on the running board. She turned and looked directly into Coral's eyes. In a voice frigid and lethal,

Amber said, "You ~~shot~~killed Gray."

[Prologue continues]

Nancy, Your writing is beautiful and this scene is very emotional. The imagery you use is stellar: I could picture everything in my head. One thing you may want to consider (or ignore) is telling this scene from Coral's POV. Right now it starts with Gray's POV, then shifts mostly to Dad's, then Coral's for a short time. But Coral says very little in this scene, she's almost invisible until the gun goes off. I get more of a sense for Amber's personality than anyone else's. From your summary it sounds like this is Coral's story, and if that's the case then perhaps telling what happened from Coral's POV might be more powerful for this scene. You could let the reader in on how she felt about Gray and Amber, so when Gray is killed the reader can have a better idea for Coral's reaction (even though she is in shock). Did she hate her brother? Did she adore him? Besides losing a brother (through her own mistake) what else did she lose? Her best friend? Her

**Comment [PHS IS16]:** Interesting. This thought is so much better than just saying "Coral was in shock."

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protector? Her enemy? If you show us a little bit of their relationship before the tragedy I think this scene can be even more powerful.

**Summary:** Coral Watson returns home to her Texas ranch forty years after the tragedy that forever changed the lives of those who survived. When long-buried secrets lead to finding a body on the ranch, Coral and her sister Amber are swept up in a vortex of international conspiracy.

Ed

PROLOGUE *uh oh...*

Southwest Texas, January, 1976

"Jackalopes are calling!" Gray yelled, as he reached inside the barn door and grabbed a rope looped over a post. He exited in a flash of red and jeans and mud-choked boots. The *magical* legendary jackrabbit with deer antlers *were* was the kids' most sought-after trophy. *[why?]* *ever? or just what's in the bucket?*

"Hey! Y'all headed out?" *[Hank Watson called to his son. Shaking the last of the oats into the horse trough, Hank scratched Buttermilk's forelock and the big buckskin tossed her head,*

halter chain jangling, demanding her master continue their breakfast ritual. *never appears again* *I don't know what this means*  
*slapping? smacking?* Knocking hay off his boots and khaki trousers, Hank buttoned his canvas jacket against

*winter* the wind. He walked through the mud and mist hopscotching puddles. *so he's Leaky wherever he was*

Stepping into the trailer shed *[huh?]* a lean-to on the south side of the barn that glowed sepia-toned in a yellow bug light *no the place for so much description* Hank pushed his cowboy hat back and combed his fingers through

his dark straight hair. He paused, a grin softening his rugged features as he watched his stair-

stepped, tow-headed children scurrying around loading the olive drab Jeep. At sixteen, fifteen,

and fourteen, Gray, Coral, and Amber looked like uneven triplets. All wore Santa's recent gifts of

*- description slows down the story - put it where it's necessary - the reader doesn't need to see your notes.*

*- take your time, don't jam <sup>Page 1 of 6</sup> so much description in, one personal at the what do we need to know about them?*  
*- relationship between them, ill.?*

matching hunting jackets—blue denim with tan corduroy collars and red-plaid blanket linings—that accentuated their similarities.

Gray, first-born and tallest, topped out at just below six feet, a "tall drink of water" as the saying went, with baby Amber a bit past five feet and Coral in between. Each with pale hair, thick and wavy: Gray's buff and outlaw long, in his father's opinion; Coral's sleek honey ponytail; and Amber's banana-puddin' pageboy with bangs that refused to lie flat. Eyes of blue gradations: azure, hyacinth, and cerulean—their watercolor painter-mother loved to use exact color names. But it was in their faces where each child's individuality showed. Gray like his father with straight nose and chiseled cheekbones; Coral soft and tulip-like, reaching upward; Amber round like the moon with secret unexplored depths.

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"Well, happy 'last day of deer season,' kids! Y'all gonna get that wily buck been hiding out by the river?"

"Sure, him and a mess of jackalopes," Gray laughed. "But Big Rack don't want to be taken. You ought to know, missing him last time."

"Doesn't want to be taken," Amber corrected from the back seat.

"Daddy didn't miss him," Coral said in defense, <sup>oh</sup> his rifle locked up."

"Locked up from buck fever!" Gray punched his father's arm, grinning. "The old man ain't got it no more."

"Anymore! Anymore!" Amber chanted.

"Amber! Pipe down!" Hank shook his head. Amber showing off. Always got to be center of attention. Little Miss Narciss <sup>us?</sup> he and her mother, <sup>the</sup> in private, sometimes called her.

[section cut]

Stepping back, Hank motioned toward the lane and the southern half of the family's almost-thirteen hundred acres on the north bank of the Nueces River some sixty miles from the border with Mexico. "Y'all go have fun. I'll get the pit ready to barbecue those jackalopes when you get back. <sup>And</sup> Now be sure to get a turkey for your mother."

<sup>This name begs for explanation</sup> "Wait!" The back screen door slammed. Ophelia Watson, her shock of blond curls tied back, ran down the steps through the porch light circle and out the <sup>need more of an introduction</sup> yard fence gate. "You forgot your Thermos and snacks!" Her golden banty rooster swaggered out of her way with a complaining cackle as Ophelia ran to the shed, her blue velour robe reaching to her muck boots. She handed a paper sack to Coral, who stashed it on the back floorboard.

Ophelia gave good-bye kisses all around, <sup>Ozzie + Hannah</sup> and with one last reminder to the kids to close the pasture gates so the cattle wouldn't roam, Hank stepped back. Arms interlinked, the parents called in unison, "Good luck!" and "Be careful!" Gray turned on the headlights and backed out of the shed.

[section cut]



*simplify or go card out*  
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"Deer are colorblind," Amber informed her brother and sister, who ignored her enlightened wisdom.

Switching hats, Gray smiled and whispered, "Thanks. Nobody shoot at what you can't see real clear. Now load up."

A dark still mist swaddled the Jeep. No birds called, no game or varmints ventured through the underbrush. Twilight lightened the cloud cover; sunrise would come at 7:30, if at all. The kids had a while to sit and wait, girls in the Jeep and Gray in his deer stand.

Amber wriggled around and found a kneeling position on the back seat. Coral removed her gloves and pulled the matching Remington twelve-gauge double-barrel shotguns from

between the seats. She handed one to her sister. Breaking the barrel, Amber inserted a brass-and-green No. 5 lead-shot shell into each chamber and lifted her gun back up.

Gray, reaching to pull his rifle from the scabbard, scooted toward the passenger side and leaned across the gearshift mound. As usual, the scope <sup>caught</sup> hung. He stretched and raised up to loosen the gun without messing up his scope and precise sighting, issuing a few whispered curse words as he worked the shoulder stock back and forth with care.

Standing behind the driver's seat, Coral broke the shotgun across her left arm, letting the barrel fall toward the outside of the Jeep. She pulled a pair of shells from the half dozen stashed in her jacket pocket and let them slip into the chambers. Snapping the barrel to the locked position, she shifted the gun to her right forearm <sup>and reaching up,</sup> ~~Coral~~ <sup>she</sup> pushed back Gray's cowboy hat that had inched down on her forehead.

From next to her <sup>Amber</sup> whispered, "I'm ready."

Coral felt her shotgun slip. Her feet rose from the floorboard as the world exploded.

<sup>recoiling</sup> Her shotgun hit the roll bar. <sup>the world exploded again.</sup> Brush vibrated with beating bird wings and panicked wildlife, the blasts replaced by screeching warnings. Frantic shrieks and screams reverberated through the mist.

<sup>really?</sup> A jackalope <sup>froze?</sup> paused, Coral saw, in a clump of prickly pear beside the Jeep.

Gray lay across the front seats. His head—blond hair, brains, bits of bone <sup>too mild mannered</sup> covered the dashboard with red and yellow. The folded windshield, tray-like, <sup>simplify</sup> held an array of color and mass that disappeared onto the hood and into the dark. An odor of gunpowder and a <sup>prelac</sup> life stench/death <sup>body</sup> stench filled Coral's nose, permeating her entire body.

<sup>still</sup> Coral's legs locked as she stared down at her brother's form draped across the seats. His hands <sup>still</sup> clasped the gun's stock, ~~now loosened from the scabbard but hanging part way~~. His boots

~~freed of the clutch pedal~~ caught the side of the Jeep and his blue denim shoulders reached the far side of the passenger seat. ~~And there he stopped.~~ He had no head, just pulsing squirts of blood landing somewhere unseen on the running board and muddy loam beneath the Jeep.

✓ Where's my cap? [Coral thought.] — dissociation-character

Amber huddled in the ~~far corner of the back seat~~ clutching her shotgun, cringing, trembling. Her knees were pulled to her chest; her blue eyes glowed bright circles in the darkness ~~made darker by the spare tire's dawn shadow~~. She stared at the back of the passenger seat. [She seemed to grow in size] as she raised her shoulders. Her head rotated, her vision moved across the dripping dashboard then down the outside line of the seat to the ~~sideways~~ streams of blood on the running board. She turned and looked directly into Coral's eyes. In a voice frigid and lethal, Amber said, "You shot Gray." — character

[Prologue continues]

yikes!  
-you're brave!

*Nancy-*

*I'm impressed with the contrast between the quiet, gentle beginning of this story and the violent conclusion. I guess I should have suspected that such a peaceful opening would lead to the horror you describe here. Good job. You've captured a life changing accident.*

*You took me by surprise.*

*I have no real problems with this opening scene.*

DAVE

**Summary:** Coral Watson returns home to her Texas ranch forty years after the tragedy that forever changed the lives of those who survived. When long-buried secrets lead to finding a body on the ranch, Coral and her sister Amber are swept up in a vortex of international conspiracy.

## PROLOGUE

Southwest Texas, January, 1976

"Jackalopes are calling!" Gray yelled (*To whom?*) as he reached inside the barn door and grabbed a rope looped over a post. He exited in a flash of red and jeans and mud-choked boots. The legendary jackrabbit with deer antlers was the kids' most sought-after trophy.

*(Transition between the first and second paragraph. Confused as to where I was and where I went to.)*

"Hey! Y'all headed out?" Hank Watson called to his son. Shaking the last of the oats into the horse trough, Hank scratched Buttermilk's forelock and the big buckskin tossed her head, halter chain jangling, demanding her master continue their breakfast ritual.

Knocking hay off his boots and khaki trousers, Hank buttoned his canvas jacket against the wind. He walked through the mud and mist hopscotching puddles.

Feed this into the  
Rest of the story  
Hidden accident killing  
Hide this or Trick let it  
Later

Stepping into the trailer shed—a lean-to on the south side of the barn that glowed sepia-toned in a yellow bug light—Hank pushed his cowboy hat back and combed his fingers through his dark straight hair. He paused, a grin softening his rugged features as he watched his stair-stepped (?), tow-headed children scurrying around loading the olive drab Jeep. At sixteen, fifteen, and fourteen, Gray, Coral, and Amber looked like uneven triplets. All wore Santa's recent ✓ gifts of matching hunting jackets—blue denim with tan corduroy collars and red-plaid blanket linings—that accentuated their similarities.

Gray, first-born and tallest, topped out at just below six feet, a "tall drink of water" ~~as the saying went,~~ with baby Amber a bit past five feet and Coral in between. Each with pale hair, thick and wavy: Gray's buff and outlaw long, in his father's opinion; Coral's sleek honey ponytail; and Amber's banana-puddin' pageboy with bangs that refused to lie flat. Eyes of blue gradations: azure, hyacinth, and cerulean—their watercolor painter-mother loved to use exact color names. But it was in their faces where each child's individuality showed. Gray like his father with straight nose and chiseled cheekbones; Coral soft and tulip-like, reaching upward; Amber round like the moon with secret unexplored depths. *(Two paragraphs of physical description may be a bit much.)*

Leaning across the Jeep, Gray slipped his .30-06 into the scabbard on the passenger side near the gearshift while Coral took her little sister's shotgun and tucked it with her own on a piece of old rug between the front seats. The girls climbed through the open sides and into the back avoiding the roll bar, a curved pipe just behind the front seats that Hank had welded to his Army surplus Willys Jeep, his tinkering-toy. The spare tire centered above the rear bumper arced like a blackened moonrise.

Thunderstorms had passed but clouds hovered; sunrise, still more than an hour away, played an unknown hand. Hank buttoned his jacket against the lingering gusts from last night's blue norther that raced across his River Road Ranch dropping the temperature to the mid forties.

"Well, happy 'last day of deer season,' kids! Y'all gonna get that wily buck been hiding out by the river?"

"Sure, him and a mess of jackalopes," Gray laughed. "But Big Rack don't want to be taken. You ought to know, missing him last time."

"Doesn't want to be taken," Amber corrected from the back seat.

"Daddy didn't miss him," Coral said in defense, "his rifle locked up."

"Locked up from buck fever!" Gray punched his father's arm, grinning. "The old man ain't got it no more."

"Anymore! Anymore!" Amber chanted.

"Amber! Pipe down!" Hank shook his head. Amber showing off. Always got to be center of attention. Little Miss Narciss he and her mother, in private, sometimes called her.

[section cut]

Stepping back, Hank motioned toward the lane and the southern half of the family's almost-thirteen hundred acres on the north bank of the Nueces River some sixty miles from the border with Mexico. "Y'all go have fun. I'll get the pit ready to barbecue those jackalopes when you get back. Now be sure to get a turkey for your mother."

"Wait!" The back screen door slammed. Ophelia Watson, her shock of blond curls tied back, ran down the steps through the porch light circle and out the yard fence gate. "You forgot your Thermos and snacks!" Her golden banty rooster swaggered out of her way with a

complaining cackle as Ophelia ran to the shed, her blue velour robe reaching to her muck boots. She handed a paper sack to Coral, who stashed it on the back floorboard.

Ophelia gave good-bye kisses all around, and with one last reminder to the kids to close the pasture gates so the cattle wouldn't roam, Hank stepped back. Arms interlinked, the parents called in unison, "Good luck!" and "Be careful!" Gray turned on the headlights and backed out of the shed.

[section cut]

Following the two-track lane—hacked through thick mesquite and cactus—that paralleled the river, Gray cut the engine downwind from the Jackalope Ambush Stands, the kids' name for their deer and hog hunting spot. About a quarter mile south in the pecan bottom, wild turkeys roosted on the bank of the river. The girls, as instructed, would wait until Gray shot, then sneak through the brush to the river and take their shots.

"Now wait five minutes after I fire," Gray whispered as he cut the engine. "I'll probably take him down with my first shot, but you girls wait. Count to sixty five times before you start out. And be quiet."

Coral nodded and mouthed, "We will."

"I'll use my watch," Amber whispered back. "That's why I'm wearing it, stupid."

"Whatever," Gray mumbled.

"You be careful, Gray," Coral said softly. "And here, wear my cap. Your cowboy hat is too dull for walking through the woods."

"Deer are colorblind," Amber informed her brother and sister, who ignored her ~~enlightened wisdom~~.

Switching hats, Gray smiled and whispered, "Thanks. Nobody shoot at what you can't see real clear. Now load up."

A dark still mist swaddled the Jeep. No birds called, no game or varmints ventured through the underbrush. Twilight lightened the cloud cover; sunrise would come at 7:30, if at all. The kids had a while to sit and wait, girls in the Jeep and Gray in his deer stand.

Amber wriggled around and found a kneeling position on the back seat. Coral removed her gloves and pulled the matching Remington twelve-gauge double barrel shotguns from between the seats. She handed one to her sister. Breaking the barrel, Amber inserted a brass-and-green No. 5 lead-shot shell into each chamber and lifted her gun back up.

Gray, reaching to pull his rifle from the scabbard, scooted toward the passenger side and leaned across the gearshift mound. As usual, the scope hung. He stretched and raised up to loosen the gun without messing up his scope and precise sighting, issuing a few whispered curse words as he worked the shoulder stock back and forth with care.

Standing(?) behind the driver's seat, Coral broke the shotgun across her left arm, letting the barrel fall toward the outside of the Jeep. She pulled a pair of shells from the half dozen stashed in her jacket pocket and let them slip into the chambers. Snapping the barrel to the locked position, she shifted the gun to her right forearm and reaching up, Coral pushed back Gray's cowboy hat that had inched down on her forehead.

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Gray lay across the front seats. His head—blond hair, brains, bits of bone—covered the dashboard with red and yellow. The folded windshield, tray-like, held an array of color and mass that disappeared onto the hood and into the dark. An odor of gunpowder and a life stench/death stench filled Coral's nose, permeating her entire body.

Coral's legs locked as she stared down at her brother's form draped across the seats. His hands clasped the gun's stock, now loosened from the scabbard but hanging part way. His boots freed of the clutch pedal caught the side of the Jeep and his blue denim shoulders reached the far side of the passenger seat. And there he stopped. He had no head, just pulsing squirts of blood landing somewhere unseen on the running board and muddy loam beneath the Jeep.

Where's my cap? Coral thought.

Amber huddled in the far corner of the back seat clutching her shotgun, cringing, trembling. Her knees were pulled to her chest; her blue eyes glowed bright circles in the darkness made darker by the spare tire's dawn-shadow. She stared at the back of the passenger seat. She seemed to grow in size as she raised her shoulders; her head rotated, her vision moved across the dripping dashboard then down the outside line of the seat to the sideways streams of blood on the running board. She turned and looked directly into Coral's eyes. In a voice frigid and lethal, Amber said, "You shot Gray."

[Prologue continues]

*(Arresting opening scene. You've established a pretty high bar with this. Good work.)*

JULIE

UPMARKET THRILLER NOVEL EXCERPT: HOME IS WHERE YOU GO BY NANCY WEBB

We've never critiqued a prologue before.

**Summary: Coral Watson returns home to her Texas ranch forty years after the tragedy that forever changed the lives of those who survived. When long-buried secrets lead to finding a body on the ranch, Coral and her sister Amber are swept up in a vortex of international conspiracy.**

Why does Coral return at 55?

PROLOGUE

Southwest Texas, January, 1976

Good start! EN MEDIAS RES.  
Exclamation draws us in.

over his shoulder  
into the horse  
across the yard  
at whom?

"Jackalopes are calling!" Gray yelled as he reached inside the barn door and grabbed a rope looped over a post. He exited in a flash of red and jeans and mud-choked boots. The legendary jackrabbit with deer antlers was the kids' most sought-after trophy.

exited from what?

"Hey! Y'all headed out?" Hank Watson called to his son. Shaking the last of the oats into the horse trough, Hank scratched Buttermilk's forelock and the big buckskin tossed her head, halter chain jangling, demanding her master continue their breakfast ritual.

word choice →  
stomping →  
brushing →

Knocking hay off his boots and khaki trousers, Hank buttoned his canvas jacket against the wind. He walked through the mud and mist hopscotching puddles.

Adjective order.  
sounds like  
"a spring  
beautiful  
day"

Stepping into the trailer shed—a lean-to on the south side of the barn that glowed sepia-toned in a yellow bug light—Hank pushed his cowboy hat back and combed his fingers through

his dark straight hair. He paused, a grin softening his rugged features as he watched his stair-stepped, tow-headed children scurrying around loading the olive drab Jeep. At sixteen, fifteen, and fourteen, Gray, Coral, and Amber looked like uneven triplets. All wore Santa's recent gifts of

JULIE

UPMARKET THRILLER NOVEL EXCERPT: *HOME IS WHERE YOU GO* BY NANCY WEBB

Then, how is Gray's flash of red... -ATL?

matching hunting jackets—blue denim with tan corduroy collars and red-plaid blanket linings—that accentuated their similarities.

Gray, first-born and tallest, topped out at just below six feet, a "tall drink of water" as the saying went, with baby Amber a bit past five feet and Coral in between. Each with pale hair, thick and wavy: Gray's buff and outlaw long, in his father's opinion; Coral's sleek honey ponytail; and Amber's banana-puddin' pageboy with bangs that refused to lie flat. Eyes of blue gradations: azure, hyacinth, and cerulean—their watercolor painter-mother loved to use exact color names. But it was in their faces where each child's individuality showed. Gray like his father with straight nose and chiseled cheekbones; Coral soft and tulip-like, reaching upward; Amber round like the moon with secret unexplored depths.

Move hyacinth

What?!

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"Well, happy 'last day of deer season. Kids! Y'all gonna get that wily buck been hiding out by the river?"

"Sure, him and a mess of jackalopes," Gray laughed. "But Big Rack don't want to be taken. You ought to know, missing him last time."

JULIE

UPMARKET THRILLER NOVEL EXCERPT: *HOME IS WHERE YOU GO* BY NANCY WEBB

"Doesn't want to be taken," Amber corrected from the back seat.

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W/ribbon twine scarf → "Wait!" The back screen door slammed. Ophelia Watson, her shock of blond curls tied back, ran down the steps through the porch light circle and out the yard fence gate. "You forgot your Thermos and snacks!" Her golden banty rooster swaggered out of her way with a complaining cackle as Ophelia ran to the shed, her blue velour robe reaching to her muck boots. She handed a paper sack to Coral, who stashed it on the back floorboard.

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JULIE

UPMARKET THRILLER NOVEL EXCERPT: *HOME IS WHERE YOU GO* BY NANCY WEBB

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Redundant  
Choose one

"Now wait five minutes after I fire," Gray whispered as he cut the engine. "I'll probably take him down with my first shot, but you girls wait. Count to sixty five times before you start out. And be quiet."

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"I'll use my watch," Amber whispered back. "That's why I'm wearing it, stupid."

stupid  
necessary?

"Whatever," Gray mumbled.

"You be careful, Gray," Coral said softly. "And here, wear my cap. Your cowboy hat is too dull for walking through the woods."

Why would he want to be noticeable to deer in the woods?  
Or, are there other hunters?

"Deer are colorblind," Amber informed her brother and sister, who ignored her enlightened wisdom.

Switching hats, Gray smiled and whispered, "Thanks. Nobody shoot at what you can't see real clear. Now load up."

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JULIE

UPMARKET THRILLER NOVEL EXCERPT: HOME IS WHERE YOU GO BY NANCY WEBB

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Why 'As usual'?

raised up noun OR (he) rose up

whispered = few...

dropped slipped

Did she move? sneeze? "Coral's shotgun slipped."

Why? How?

"They were matched by screams within the Jeep."

Had it fallen forward?

Oh, how awful!

too soon but certainly the smell of Gray's insards

1-word

JULIE

UPMARKET THRILLER NOVEL EXCERPT: HOME IS WHERE YOU GO BY NANCY WEBB

freed of the clutch pedal caught the side of the Jeep and his blue denim shoulders reached the far side of the passenger seat. And there he stopped. He had no head, just pulsing squirts of blood landing somewhere unseen on the running board and muddy loam beneath the Jeep.

Compare to something seen in some horror movie BUT emphasize that this horror was REAL.

Really? That's her first thought?

Where's my cap? Coral thought.

What is illuminating her eyes?

necessary?

Amber huddled in the far corner of the back seat clutching her shotgun, cringing, trembling. Her knees were pulled to her chest; her blue eyes glowed bright circles in the darkness made darker by the spare tire's dawn-shadow. She stared at the back of the passenger seat. She seemed to grow in size as she raised her shoulders; her head rotated, her vision moved across the dripping dashboard then down the outside line of the seat to the sideways streams of blood on the running board. She turned and looked directly into Coral's eyes. In a voice frigid and lethal, Amber said, "You shot Gray."

Active verb w/ "she" as subject

"She raised, rotated, glanced at, stared at, surveyed"?

[Prologue continues]

OH, MY, NANCY!

I WANT TO READ THE REST OF THE PROLOGUE. AND, THEN SEE HOW THE STORY STARTS 40 YEARS LATER. WHAT BRINGS CORAL BACK TO TEXAS?

ON PAGE 5, YOU POINT OUT SHRIEKS AND BEATING WINGS. THEN, THERE IS NO MORE MENTION OF EXTERNAL ANIMAL NOISES.

HAVE CORAL AND AMBER'S SHRIEKS MATCH OR DRAWN OUT THOSE OF NATURE. HAVE ANIMALS AND BIRDS FLOCK TO OR SCAMPER FROM THE JEEP.

THIS STORY HAS SUCH POTENTIAL.