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Iowa Gothic

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IOWA GOTHIC

by

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ABSTRACT

Iowa Gothic deals with the stories that we tell ourselves, for better or worse, and is an interconnected short story collection set in the fictional town of Madison, Iowa. The stories are grounded in realism, but are also slightly off from the way we typically experience the world: a hoarder who tries to win a cooking contest by boiling a rabbit, a woman who recreates her neighbors' living rooms out of their yard sale items, a hypnotic rooster that starts a feud, residents who believe in ghosts, or at least the communal value of ghost stories. By asking the reader to agree to these conceits, the narrative exists in a world that is at once familiar and unfamiliar, one that's only mostly comfortable because liable to split open at any time.

Characters reappear at different stages in their lives and in the context of their relationships to other characters. Each story is told in the third person point of view except the very last, the story told by the overarching figure of the book, the only "I" narrator.

The characters' grotesque ways of thinking are born from the dynamics of their town and the latent guilt created by its forgotten origins. The buried nature of this communal guilt contributes to many of the gothic moments in the collection.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The paranormal investigators were lost, their directions scribbled on a rumpled napkin from a diner in town, by then thirty minutes back.

The heavy lidded man behind the counter had given them only landmarks. Keep straight past the hot air balloon field. Turn at the Wade's silo, says Wade on it letters six feet high. Turn again on the B road. If you hit Copper Creek Bridge you've gone too far.

"Do you have any road names?" asked the young one, Maddox, the one with the cameras.

The man licked his lips, lowered his lids more. "Keokuk," he said.

There was no Keokuk. All the signs said Highway 65. The investigators drove in tense silence, unable to relax, to let shoulders touch seats. They looked far ahead, searching for one of the landmarks. They held their breath every time a silo came into view, but each one's large gray or blue surface was blank.

Maddox held the white napkin square against the sun, as if the light shining through thin paper might reveal a secret. His camera lenses were at his feet, his full spectrum camcorder in his lap.

"Let me see that again." Winnie reached an arm over her camouflage cut offs and grabbed the napkin. She twisted it left and right, then flung it back at Maddox. "Let's stop and ask someone," she said.

The man they called Santa drove, his shoulders hunched and his hands clenched at one and seven. His red wet lips peeked from two thick swaths of snow-white facial hair, and his belly forced him to push his seat back almost too far to reach the wheel. "We're not stopping," he said, his voice gravel like the road under them. "We're running out of daylight."

There was no one to ask anyway unless they went up a winding rocky driveway to one of the high-sitting houses that dotted the roadside. Winnie suggested it to Maddox and he mumbled that he didn't want to get shot.

They squinted, looked for any change in the scenery, but the road continued the same beyond the horizon.

The van crested a hill and there it was. A cobalt silo against the pastel sky. Four white letters as visible as a town name on a water tower. There, at the silo, the roadscape morphed into single lanes and blacktop. A single blinking red light was suspended over the road on a wire. Small signs on either side read G 14.

"This must be it," said Santa.

"Weren't we supposed to turn right at the silo?" Winnie asked.

"No, left," Santa said. "He said left."

"It might have been right," said Maddox. He picked up the napkin. "That guy didn't write it down."

Santa yanked the wheel left. Winnie looked out a small back window and down the road they didn't take. Flat as the land was, she could see a long way down. "It looks the same either way," she said.

Santa tightened his grip on the wheel.

Winnie watched until the other road disappeared.

Every trip Santa asked directions from the least helpful person in sight. Every trip they got lost. Every trip Maddox suggested the GPS, and every trip Santa refused to believe that a computer could get them there faster. Once, they drove around the building they were trying to find five times before they realized what it was.

Maddox saw Santa's clenched teeth and went for it again. "We should just get out the GPS."

It was Winnie who shot him down that time. "And put in what?" she asked. "Haunted railroad tracks, Madison, Iowa?"

Not two miles from the investigators, the town of Madison. The surrounding farmland a flat band between town and city, smaller every year. Country roads a network of almost indistinguishable interlocking blacktop, gravel, dirt. Soy beans and corn. The buildings of Des Moines in the horizon, the place the sky never gets all the way dark. And Madison caught between. Corn and four-lane highways. Woods and city park. River beds, muddy creeks, and new housing developments. Chickens and doggie day care. Pickup trucks and smart cars.

People in Madison already knew paranormal investigators were in town. People who had never met before talked about it in grocery store lines, in locker rooms, at the gas pumps. They spoke low and serious, and the menace of it grew into something palpable with every conversation.

Truckers passing through before returning to the highway, children whose parents hadn't told them, newcomers who hadn't heard yet asked, "What's here to investigate?"

Madison was normal enough. The sun shone. The birds chirped. The paperboy still delivered the news every morning even though most people got it online or from the TV.

The Madisonians saw the looks on the faces of the truckers, the children, the new in town. Heard the uninitiated say, "What's so weird here?" Most Madisonians clamped their mouths, turned away. Check out clerks kept ringing up cigarettes and beef jerky, mothers kept washing dishes, neighbors kept watering lawns. "We don't like to discuss it," they said. "Go play." "Have a nice day."

And then someone would tell. The old man drinking coffee as the trucker left the stop, the mischievous older sister pulling her brother into the linen closet to whisper, the neighbor who liked the kind of thing she was about to tell.

"It all has to do with Madison's most tragic story," they said, their eyes the same slits, their voice the same low decibel as they told the version they were taught. "A long time ago, a school bus full of children, more than a dozen, stalled on the tracks that run across County Road G 14. The bus driver tried to save them, but the train came before he could. The children's spirits never left. So, if you sit in a car in front of those tracks with the gear in neutral and your eyes shut all the way, soon you'll feel your car move forward. And it will keep moving. Slow and steady, it will roll and crunch over the gravel and past the hundred-year oaks growing along the road. Once your car has cleared the other side of the tracks, it'll come to a complete stop in front of Copper Creek Bridge, as gentle as if you had put your own foot on the brake." They paused for effect, then delivered the last part. "If you put dust or flour on your bumper, you'll see small handprints where the children pushed your car across."

If the audience looked convinced, they'd stop there and smile slow. Others, they'd feel the need to add to. "Madisonians have all tried it at one time or another," they said, "or else a cousin has, or a friend. Some claim they hear children laughing, others say it's silent except for birds in the trees, but everyone moves, and they all agree that no one living pushes them. No one would fake it. No one has to."

"And the investigators want to try it out?" the truckers, children, newcomers asked.

"Yes and no," the others said. They already knew what the investigators wanted. There was only reason to come all the way to the middle of the country for an old set of railroad tracks. "They think it isn't possible. They want to prove us wrong."

The investigators' van was not discreet. It was large, white, and noisy. A rattling sound followed it, like cans tied to the back. A bright yellow scrape ran the length of one side from an encounter with a fast food driveway pole. Small windows sat high on the back doors. The body was dinged in several places, and a rumpled door sticker read OUT THERE. A cartoon ghost manifested from the last E.

They were a research team, Winnie said over and over. They belonged to a university. They didn't need a name or a cartoon ghost. Santa said the name gave them a sense of community. Maddox grumbled that they at least didn't need the stupid door sign.

"My girlfriend drew that sign," said Santa, and that ended the discussion every time.

The van's bad suspension against the pitted blacktop sent Maddox and Winnie against the ceiling more than once. They both groaned when the path stopped at a forked

B-road. Rain gullies made patterns in the packed dirt. Again, small signs on either side read G 14. And there another sign that said the road wasn't maintained and drivers should continue at their own risk.

"Which way now?" said Maddox.

"Right," said Winnie. "I know that guy said we had to turn right at some point. And he mentioned a B road."

Santa turned the wheel and the van bounced worse than before. They drove straight for a long time, Winnie and Maddox gripping the window frames to keep upright. Again they kept their uncertain silence, the held breath hope that they hadn't been driving for miles down the county highway and now this tiny bumpy road the wrong way, studying each cow, fence post, and tree-veiled house for a sign they were on the right track.

"Let's turn around," said Winnie. Her hair was disheveled, bounced clean out of her ponytail. Dark circles were forming under Santa's eyes. "We don't need this case," she said.

"We're almost there," said Santa.

"How do you know?" asked Maddox. He held his stomach as the road bumps jerked his stabilizing arm back and forth. "Winnie's right, let's turn around. I don't feel good."

"Don't puke on me," said Winnie and squished her torso against her door. Maddox rolled his eyes and turned away.

Santa let out a loud, irritating yell. Winnie and Maddox looked at him and then ahead to the old tracks running across the road.

And, a little beyond, a narrow wooden bridge with huge overhanging oaks that rose out of the creek bed below.

"Copper Creek," Santa read, squinting through his glasses at the green sign with white lettering put up years ago by the state. Unlike so many newer signs, it was free of graffiti or bullet holes. To their right, a fallow field, the yellow weeds so high a person might get lost in them. To the left, thick woods. And the old railroad track curving in to divide the two. Santa made his obnoxious loud whoop again. "We're here," he said, and pulled the van into position.

They were ready. EMF detector for checking electronic field disruptions. Analogue tape recorder for picking up electronic voice phenomena. Wind chimes covered with glow-in-the-dark-paint. None of them doubted that the phenomenon in Madison was a result of an optical illusion. They'd seen it before. The seemingly flat road would prove to actually dip downhill. They disproved a similar case in San Antonio a few months before. So when they heard the story from a trucker in a dingy bar about a town one thousand miles north with the same mystery, they drove sixteen hours to check it out themselves.

"We're running out of light," Santa said. They hauled equipment out of the van and onto the dusty road.

The residents of Madison called each other, texted each other, walked down the street to find each other. "Let's go out there," they said. "Are you going?"

They nodded, agreed. "If those investigators want to do it, they have to do it right."

In other places, some might have found relief in the possibility there was a scientific explanation for reported ghosts. People in Madison didn't think about the tracks that way. No one ever referred to the tracks as haunted. They never used that word. It was what it was, phenomena like Old Faithful in Yellowstone or Michigan's Paulding Light. It was something that happened, something strange, something other, but they would never say ghost. And it was something to do, the way going to the movies or a community pool party is something that happens, something to do on a Saturday night.

They left their neighbors and went home. They fed their children an early supper and brushed their hair, shaved, applied makeup, put on fresh clothes. Residents from town and country both formed a line of cars out to the G 14 tracks.

"Those investigators. They'll see," they told each other on the way.

When their children turned on the car radio, they punched it off again.

The paranormal investigators grouped around the van in a circle resembling a tiny football huddle, having a post land survey argument.

"The road is flat," said Santa. "I measured it three times."

"It has to be something else, then," Maddox said. "We did this in San Antonio, we can do it again."

"In San Antonio, the road was sloped," said Winnie. "We just saw this one isn't. It's not the same." She glanced down at her shoes every few seconds.

Santa slipped his tongue over his bright red lips. "Maybe they're lying," he said.

"A whole town?" asked Maddox, his eyebrows high. "Let's try it ourselves and get some film of it."

Engines whirring broke their huddle. A white station wagon rolled toward them. More cars not far behind. They created a cloud of fine dust as their drivers bounced around shallow curves. The investigators could see cars and people rise and fall as wheels hit ruts. The white cloud hung a moment at the tops of weeds in the fallow field, then filtered down into the investigators' eyes, noses, throats. The cars continued one after the other, bumpers almost touching, until the line disappeared around a curve.

"What the?" Santa coughed against the particles of dirt road stuck in his windpipe.

"What's going on?" asked Winnie. Maddox shrugged and walked forward, waving his arms furious to stop the first car, keep it from mowing them down. But the cars slowed as they approached the investigators. They pulled onto the grassy shoulder and motors growled off. Santa got close enough to touch the hood of the first car. Residual heat waves leaked from the hood and wrapped around his torso, his low-hanging hands.

"Shit," he said. The swarm of cars wasn't stopping. "Most of the town is on its way."

"What do they want?" Winnie scuffed her shoe against a soft spot in the dirt.

The first wave of Madisonians got out of their cars. "If you gotta do this," they told the investigators, "you gotta do it right."

Soon the roads looked like the Fourth of July, everyone pulled over on the shoulder. But instead of climbing over and on top of their cars, the residents of Madison unbuckled toddlers and pulled babies out of car seats, some sleeping some crying some clapping. They helped grandparents with canes and walkers, held hands. Big hands and

little hands, big hands and big hands, little hands and little hands, they headed down the road toward the tracks.

Some nodded at the investigators, some walked right past, eyes ahead. A few paused as if to say something, then kept going. Up the road, more cars wound down to the woods, the open field, the tracks that divided them.

A line of people, and another and then another, spanned from the tracks to the first car parked and back again until the dirt road was invisible through the forest of bodies. Only a few babies cried, a few birds chirped, the water under the bridge trickled on.

A few cars still straggled down the road, the hard sound of wheels on gravel noticeable in the quiet.

Santa worked his way through the backs of the throng. When he reached the van, Winnie and Maddox stared at the town surrounding them. The town stared back.

Someone cracked the silence. "You gotta do it right," a female voice shouted from a few rows back. "Or it will never work." Her words a bullet, ringing through woods where only a moment before the quiet was so thick blood could be heard rushing through ears. Voices came from everywhere, the talk louder than normal. They gave instructions, called children from back running down to the bridge, wondered about the on or off of Maddox's camera, asked questions about the camera phone, shared their experiences about the tracks. Did you know, Have you seen, How about, The truth is, all at once.

Santa breathed long and projected from deep in his lungs. "We're here to figure out your ghost story."

A wave of shaking heads, clucking, murmuring from the crowd. "That's no story," they said. "It's truth." Their voices multiplied and grew loud enough no one could hear Santa anymore.

Santa raised his hands, tried to quiet the crowd. They were supposed to be in Kentucky the next day to investigate a haunted house, and they were losing light.

"It's now or not at all," he told Winnie and Maddox under the chatter. They nodded, and got into the van.

"I hope they leave us alone," said Winnie, half-turned in her seat to face the sea of strangers.

"I haven't set up my cameras," Maddox said, and opened his door. The crowd shut it against him.

Hands reached inside the van's windows, rolled them further down. More hands set the shifter in neutral. Others spread more dust on the bumper.

Santa put his foot on the brake.

"Don't," the town said, a collective reaction as the van's lights flashed. "It won't work if you brake." When the brake light went off, the hands disappeared. The crowd stepped away.

"This isn't the way we usually do this," said Santa. "We need a camera rolling."

"Cameras tend to break out here," someone said. A murmur of agreement from the crowd.

"We need to try it anyway," said Maddox. He got out and set up three cameras, one by the car and two on the other side of the tracks. He moved slower than needed. Every time he was about to walk back to the car, he made an adjustment, checked one

more something underneath a camera, stared at the surrounding trees, calculated the angle of the remaining sunlight one more time.

Some in the crowd cleared their throats in his direction. Santa motioned for him. "Quick," Santa said. "Before there's no more light to check."

Maddox got back in the van and someone produced three black pirate bandanas from the recent middle school play. They motioned for the investigators to tie them around their heads. The investigators refused at first. Winnie waved them away. Maddox sat with his hands under his thighs, not responding. Someone pushed the bandanas into Santa's hands. He tried to give them back.

The town insisted. "You're scientists," they said. "You gotta prove to us you did it right."

Santa gave a heavy sigh. "Put these on," he told Maddox and Winnie in his gravelly voice, handing back the bandanas. "Give them what they want so we can get out of here."

The investigators tied the black cloth around their eyes. The town stepped back and closed theirs. They admonished older children to keep them shut, held hands over infants' and toddlers' faces.

The paranormal investigators stiffened, kept their eyes closed against the fabric. They prepared themselves for either the jolt of movement or the continuing kinetic stillness. The residents of Madison listened for the sound of van tires.

"Are you moving?" the town called out.

"No," the investigators replied.

The crowd shifted, unsure what next.

"No one's peeking?" the town asked.

"No," the investigators said, although Winnie kept her right eye open a slit. A smudge of light came through the grid of her eyelashes.

A pause. An airplane passed overhead. Its rumble paced out the moment of silence.

A cracking sound, like a thin branch snapping under too much weight, came from down the road. All held their breath, listening in the close-eyed dark, waiting for another sound. None came.

"How about now?" asked the crowd. "Now you're moving."

"No, nothing" replied the investigators.

All breathed out, drained their lungs, figured the snap had been an animal running or branch breaking.

The crowd opened their eyes, took hands off children's faces. Neighbors nudged each other and mouthed words. Their lips moved in deliberate circles around the message, their hands pointing, turning, saying, "Something is wrong."

It wasn't going to work. Standing there with the cameras set up, night drawing ever closer, and the investigators shifting in their van, the entire crowd realized it.

A silent argument started in the most basic sign language. They didn't have much time to solve the problem. Some town members made pushing motions toward the van. Others crossed their arms and shook their heads. Lips pressed together to keep from making noise. Feet stamped, muffled by the dirt.

The children's faces were blank, eyes too wide. They watched each other, unsure how take the waving hands and rolling eyes they'd never seen from their parents,

grandparents, teachers, coaches. They sensed the panic of the moment, the slippery sand feeling of time running short.

One small girl named Bella, slight with straight black hair, made the decision for them. She broke eye contact with the other children and watched her father. His mouth open wide, his big square hands straight out, one foot forward. He mimed pushing actions and she saw how much bigger his hands were than hers. She stepped between crowd and van. No one made a sound. The investigators sat rigid in their seats, but she could tell by the set of their mouths they were getting impatient. She walked to the dusty back bumper and placed her hands on the warm white metal. When she pushed, the van didn't budge.

For a few long seconds, the adults stared at her small frame leaning against the van. Then a common wheel turned, a communal thought clicked, a silent collective resolution. A mother, then another, a father, a grandfather brought their children forward. The adults placed small hands next to Bella's on the dusty bumper. They squeezed thin forearms, smiled into short faces. When no more child hands could fit, the adults stepped back, an all but visible line between themselves and their children.

The van loomed above and belched hot exhaust over small torsos and mouths. The motor vibrated the children's hands and arms. None of them cringed or cried as the grayish-white powder came off onto their palms. Dust from the higher parts of the van flaked to rest on the tops of their hands. They pushed and the van inched forward. They strained harder and the van rolled toward the tracks.

Heads jerked inside the moving van. The investigators twisted left and right as they felt the motion. Their mouths twitched, but no sound came.

Then Winnie's voice, high and strained. "Are you moving it?"

"What?" the residents of Madison responded.

"The van, are you moving it?" Santa asked, his booming voice less steady than before.

"No," said dozens of adult voices.

"You're moving it." Maddox's voice was rough, like he'd yanked it out of a paper bag.

"No, we're not," the adults said again, and smiled at each other. At all times, the crowd kept a boundary between themselves and the van, disassociated themselves from the children doing the pushing.

The van kept steady momentum down the road and crossed the tracks with a thunk thunk thunk. Small muscles strained behind it. In the fading light and at a distance, the children did look otherworldly, chalky with the falling dust, eyes dark and focused, their mouths in determined lines.

Santa tore his blindfold off and reached to put the shifter into drive. His muscles took over and instead he slammed it into reverse. Small bodies hurled themselves out of the van's backward path. The adults heard the scream as Bella fell and the tire backed over her leg. Santa got the van in drive, stood on the gas, and took off for good over the rickety wooden bridge ahead.

The leg was crushed. Bella, a crumpled shaking spot on the ground.

For a moment, the crowd still held back, still separated itself, still denied action. Then the rush forward, Bella's parents at the front. Her leg lay useless on the ground, bent like an L-bracket. But no tears from her yet. She twisted her head to stare at her

leg. Voices shouted. Cars started up. They rushed her down the dirt road to the hospital in Des Moines.

Stragglers picked up the cameras. They tried to power them up, but couldn't. The lenses and casings were still intact, but the amber lights were dark. The cameras' eyes reflected the last bit of light, and those present gathered around shuddered. In the spreading dark, they threw the cameras in the woods. They hurried into their cars, unable to shake the feeling they were being watched.

CHAPTER 2

CORNFIELD SURVIVAL TIPS

Joshua thought it was a bird. It fell, blown by the wind rolling across his father's cornfield. The same breeze blew his hair straight back from his head.

Closer, the object was a pop bottle of the lemon-lime variety. He looked up for a hot air balloon, which would have been nothing unusual in Madison. The balloon field was near their farm and dozens floated over almost every summer day. But that day was too windy. Joshua watched large trees sway in the yard where the wicker porch chair lay on its side. The flag stood straight out from its spot next to the house, and he figure the wind power was probably a 6 on the Beaufort Scale.

He picked up the bottle and held it away, tried to recreate the last few minutes. It had fallen from the sky. He couldn't think of another explanation, although he was pretty sure that wasn't supposed to be possible. He thumped the glass with his forefinger. It was thick, but he was surprised the bottle hadn't cracked. Once, he'd taken a bunch of objects to the barn loft and dropped them to see how fast they'd fall, which ones would break. All the glass ones broke, even the heavy citrus juicer.

He took the bottle as a sign. He had become preoccupied with signs. He still walked under ladders, let the black cat that hung around the schoolyard cross his path, and never threw salt after knocking over the shaker. He kept himself alert, though, to anything that would confirm that his mom was still around, hovering between earth and

the next place, that she watched and kept him out of trouble. So when he swung from his rope hanging over the creek and his foot caught, his mom sent his father at that exact moment to save him. When the rooster saw him as just a very big rival, puffed its feathers, and started for him, a stick appeared that Joshua knew hadn't been there before. He held it above his head, made himself too tall to be a bird, and walked back to the house where he shut the door, his heart slamming against his ribs. When he did knock over the salt, he'd scan the granules for patterns until his father yelled and swept the white mess back into its container. He collected these signs like pieces of evidence in an experiment, and his hypothesis always came back to her. That she was there protecting him, even more than she had in life.

When Joshua was six, his father left a ladder in the carport. A bird had nested in the V of two boards. He'd seen robins' eggs, empty and half-missing on the ground, and there was a chance to see a full one. He climbed the ladder, fast, before his dad could see. He was short and the ladder was wobbly. His hand missed a rung and his foot slipped off. His head hit the concrete below. Six stitches to close the split.

He rubbed his skull that was weaker than the bottle in his hands.

He noticed the small scrap in the bottom, turning the slow spreading gray of damp paper, but bit back his curiosity and held the bottle to his eye for a minute. Distant silos, trees surrounding the property, his father's horse Mina back at the barn, everything was covered with a thin strip of film.

"Dad," he shouted.

Russell turned around, his shirt stuffed into the front of his pants.

"Look at this," Joshua said.

He walked toward his father and held the bottle out, his grip still firm. "It fell from the sky. I saw it."

Russell squinted at the bottle, then turned around to the fence again. "Probably thrown from a hot air balloon."

"That's what I thought at first, too," said Joshua. He watched the corn sprouts shake in a gust. "But it's too windy for balloons today. And there's something inside here." He hesitated, watching his father's backside, afraid of how he would react. Joshua whispered it: "It's her again."

Russell spun around, faltered a little when he stopped himself. He leaned down and put huge square hands on Joshua's shoulders. He didn't say anything.

"Plus it didn't break," said Joshua. He wavered. "That's a long way to fall. Don't you think it should've broken?"

When Russell spoke, his voice was quiet. "There is always trash in this damn field. I could have dropped it myself weeks ago."

"You don't drink pop," said Joshua. His shoulders cramped. He made his nostrils small against the sweet-sour smell of his father's breath. He stopped himself from saying what his father did drink, put out of mind his mom's china hutch stocked with amber-filled bottles.

"Then you dropped it," Russell said. "Or for all we know, it was those Franklins again, shooting garbage from the top of their hill." He glanced up and narrowed his eyes.

Joshua flinched. He hated thinking about the Franklins. He avoided looking at their hill, the place his mother's body had been found. A hit and run that threw her into their ditch right before they burned it.

He couldn't wait until the corn was tall enough to block the view.

He shook the bottle. "I watched it fall, he said. "It was her."

Russell released his grip. His features, hardened by the last four months, sagged down into the soft creases Joshua used to know.

"She's gone, Josh," Russell said. "She's just gone." A small metal container appeared from inside his jacket. His face hardened again. He walked down the fence to a place where the horse's scratching made the wire slack.

"She's not the only one," Joshua said.

Joshua sat on his bed and shook the bottle, tried to dislodge the scrap. It stuck to the sugary bottom. He shook again. It flattened and conformed to the bottle's shape.

He frowned. He would have to smash it open. Like a geode. From his underwear drawer he grabbed an old long sock, then tiptoed downstairs and out to the garage for a hammer.

The garage was warm and humid. Joshua looked out the small rectangle windows. He could see his father's wicker chair by the grill, positioned facing the cornfield so he could flip burgers without standing up. Joshua poked at his father's overflowing workbench, trying not to make noise. He saw a small hammer buried under wrenches and a handsaw. A game of Pick Up Sticks. Tools clanged together as they shifted. They sounded like alarms. He froze, waiting for the garage door open.

Nothing happened.

"Thanks, Mom," he whispered.

Hammer in hand, he slid through the kitchen.

He thought about what the note might say. He didn't expect it to address him by name, but maybe it would be in her bold, looped handwriting. Even just a few letters would be all the proof he needed.

Joshua sped up, then ran through the house and leapt up the stairs, taking them in twos.

He crashed onto his bedroom floor.

He couldn't go fast enough. He slipped the bottle in the sock and gave it a firm tap with the hammer head. Felt it break into several pieces. He shook the sock until the scrap fell out with a bunch of glass. It was tacky in his hand. He flattened it, afraid to pick it up.

"The weather is wonderful."

The message was typed in red on a small thin strip of paper. He'd seen the same every time he and his father had gotten take-out together.

He kicked the paper into the pile of glass. Swung the hammer down on the sock, hard. A flying glass shard escaped the weave. It stuck under his brow, just above his eyelid. Without thinking, he grabbed the shard out. No blood. He ran down the hall to the bathroom.

He touched his nose to the cold mirror, searching. Pulled at the skin around his eye, poking, prodding. Tilted his head in and out of the single overhead light. He couldn't see where the shard had entered. He couldn't even be sure where the wound should've been.

Towels stitched with his mom's initials still hung next to the sink. He ran his fingers over the curly letters.

Down the hall, his father cleared his throat in the low growl Joshua had grown up hearing. It made him freeze. From where he stood, he could see his father lean into the open room. He tried to come up with an excuse for his mess. His father stayed in front of the doorway, staring, then swayed forward as if to enter. Joshua was sure he would step on the glass. Joshua started down the hall, but as soon as he left the bathroom, his father leaned out of the doorframe and wandered toward his own room.

Joshua got under his covers, clothes still on. Glass shone on the thin blue carpet. He stretched his right leg out to see if he could touch the glass with the tip of his shoe, but his legs weren't long enough. Instead, he closed his eyes and turned away from the broken bottle.

They called her She Monster. She lived on the corner of Vine and Jesup, and although in

a well-established neighborhood with huge old oaks surrounded by lawns trimmed to town specifications, the house had an exterior to match the stories about its occupant. Outside a few pieces of broken down cheap lawn accessories languished: a rusting metal lawn chair, a small table tipped on its side, a grill with twisted metal legs, two dozen half-dead plants in the middle of the walk. On the steps, countless cardboard boxes rotted in a haphazard pattern with so much random debris thrown in it was hard to pick out individual items: mugs, kitchen pots, a toilet seat, a fake Christmas wreath. The woman inside had murdered her own husband, but the police hadn't been able to prove it.

Normally, Joshua and Maurice would ride their bikes faster past She Monster's house.

But that time when Maurice stood up on his bike to pump the pedals harder, Joshua got off and marched up the steps. He reached forward and pushed the doorbell. He held his breath. A faint chime echoed in the cluttered yard and a black cat paw shot out from under the door. Down the sidewalk, Maurice stopped, but did not come back.

Joshua stood in front of the door, his determination draining. He turned to go.

"Guess she's not home," he called to Maurice.

A scraping sound as the front door of the house opened. Half-swing, it got stuck on the debris where a welcome mat should have been. Joshua jumped back, ready to run.

She was young, but the bags under her round eyes and her serious expression made it clear, even to Joshua, that she'd experienced more than most. She didn't look surprised to see him. Behind her, clutter stretched from floor to ceiling. A musty, spoiled smell spilled from the house. Joshua wanted to gag, but couldn't. He stammered, his mind blank. He didn't move.

She opened her mouth. She seemed to be weighing her words. Then she smiled.

"I know why you're here," she said, and reached a lotioned hand toward Joshua.

Joshua jumped off the porch. Maurice was already running. The remaining eight blocks to Maurice's house, Joshua slapped his sneakers as hard as he could against the concrete. He barely heard Maurice's panicked voice shouting over the rush of pounding blood in his ears.

Joshua watched Russell through the kitchen window as Maurice and his mom drove down the drive. Russell was slumped over on the counter, head propped on his knuckles. When she dropped Joshua off, Maurice's mom had said, "Nice to have you over Joshua," but didn't park the car. Maurice said, "See you tomorrow," but didn't

come inside. Russell didn't look up when Joshua slammed the car door. Joshua knew he could hear it.

The wicker chair was on the porch. The light green on young corn stalks was just visible. The corn was growing fast and soon it would be to Joshua's chest, eyes, and then over his head. Mina whinnied and rubbed her head against her fence, watched Joshua close. When she realized his hands were empty, she snorted and took off across the pasture toward her water tank.

The faded light made the unshuttered house's insides more visible by the minute. He examined his father. Russell's hair was all cowlicks. A lot of gray strands had sprouted on the top of his head. His torso seemed slimmer than Joshua remembered. Dirty bowls and plates and pans towered around him. His boots were still on, caked with mud.

Joshua made the turn into the kitchen, expecting to walk by the lump at the table and go upstairs.

Russell stood straight up, as if he'd been that way all along. He looked ridiculous. No two pieces of his hair pointed in the same direction. He wore his wife's frilly white apron, which even though it was far too tight in the gut, he had managed to tie in a small bow behind his back. He stirred a pot on the stove, splashing all over.

"Hey kiddo," Russell said. He gave the pot an extra hard stir. "Almost time for dinner."

"No thanks," said Joshua. "I'm not that hungry. I had meatloaf at Maurice's house."

"But you love cheese and broccoli soup."

Joshua looked in the pot. Before, he would have eaten four bowls. But the watery yellow liquid with bobbing chunks of broccoli stalk looked nothing like what his mom had made. He saw a plastic bag on the counter, yellow drips clinging to it.

"It's too warm for soup," he said. Once again, he headed for the stairs.

"Okay." The spoon clanked as it fell into the pot. "I thought we could eat together. It's been a while."

Not just the apron and the cooking, something else wasn't the way it usually was. Joshua checked eyebrows, clothes, teeth for signs of change. They were still bushy, burgundy button-down, slightly rounded. When Russell spoke again, Joshua realized what it was. His father's speech was clear and easy, something he hadn't heard in months. He looked around for the coffee cup that usually held Russell's whiskey. Russell thought, Joshua knew, the coffee cup was a good disguise. Joshua let him think so.

"Josh. You okay? You look out of it."

"I'm okay. Let's eat."

Through most of the meal, Russell smiled and rubbed his hands. Joshua poked the woody broccoli stalks with his spoon tip.

"May I be excused?" asked Joshua.

Russell's smile got smaller.

"I'll be right back," Joshua said.

When he returned to the table, the coffee mug was back too.

"Just a little after dinner pick-me-up," said Russell. "I'd give you some, but coffee will stunt your growth."

Joshua nodded. He sat down and held out a small scrap of paper. "This is what was in that bottle," he said.

"Huh?"

"The bottle I showed you a while ago. This was inside."

"Looks like a fortune cookie message to me," Russell said.

"Me too," said Joshua. "But read what it says."

Russell glanced at the slip of paper between his fingers, then at Joshua.

"Does it mean anything to you?" Joshua asked. "Do you think it might be—Do you think it might mean something?"

"I think it means someone got take-out," said Russell. "And fortune cookie companies should come up with better fortunes." He squinted at Joshua. "Why? What's it supposed to mean?"

"Never mind. Thanks for dinner." He plucked the paper from his father's hands and left the room.

Joshua put the scrap of paper under the glass on his desk. He found a composition notebook under his bed and wrote some observations about escaping She Monster's house. It amounted to a smattering of impressions written haphazard across the page. He realized he needed to be more scientific. He needed measurements, controls, variables. He turned the page and spelled out the hypothesis he'd been turning around in his head. His mom was around, protected him, still made sure he was okay. Somehow, writing it down made it seem more plausible.

He took his own measurements, wrapped measuring tape around his head, stepped on the cold white bathroom scale.

Calculated his body mass index. He took his temperature, held the unpleasant metal prong under his own tongue.

Outside, the wicker chair was in the yard again, this time close to the tree line, facing the cornfield. Joshua wanted to sit in it. He knew from the chair in the dark, he wouldn't be able to see up the hill, the Franklins' farm, the ditch. From the chair, it would be possible to look at the field and see only a wall of shadow.

He moved on to measure the fire pit.

The fire was already up to Joshua's waist when Maurice and his cousin Peter arrived. Joshua hid the composition book under one of the square hay bales Russell pulled up.

Russell sat with them, in his chair instead of on a hay bale, roasting marshmallows and staring into the distance. After a while, he stood up. "I'll leave you boys to it," he said, and walked off toward the house, dragging the chair behind him.

They ate marshmallows and hotdogs and stuffed hay down each other's shirts, but Joshua made mental observations the whole time. He decided against asking for their measurements, so he got as close as he could. Peter was the smallest, Maurice the tallest but thinnest. Peter's head was bigger than his own. Maurice's head was bigger yet, but his was mostly hair.

Joshua backed away from the fire. He ran, felt his feet lift, intense heat on his hands, arms, face, chest, did a sideways somersault as he landed back on the ground, felt his face move forward through the air that felt cool after the fire, hit his knees, and out of instinct ran about ten steps before he slowed to a walk.

With each step back to the fire, he tested his parts.

Nothing hurt, nothing seemed out of place, fingers and toes moved okay, his back felt fine. Had he even done it? When he was younger he did cartwheels that were really just jumping around on the floor.

Peter was already in motion.

Someone had set the moment on slow. Peter ran straight at the burning timber, bent his knees, lifted his arms, and jumped. As his feet left the ground, his body made a crescent like he was diving into a swimming pool and not over a burning mass of wood and cardboard. And then he was arched over an entire half of the fire, his face illuminated red, his nose an inch away from the highest flame. His body moved as if on a track, the way it pivoted over the fire's zenith, hovered there, continued over. When Peter's hands brushed the grass on the other side, his legs were above them, ready to land. As his legs lowered, so did his head and neck. He landed on his upper back three feet from the fire pit, and rolled up to his knees as his right hand shot out. He ran headfirst into the dark part of the yard.

When he made it back to the fire, he sat with a heavy thud on the end of the nearest hay bale and lowered himself until his back was flat against it.

Joshua went over.

Peter waved him off. "Landed harder on my back than I meant to," he said. "It hurts, but I'm fine."

It wasn't lost on Joshua that he'd made it over fine when Peter hadn't, and his head was whirring with things to write down later, but he managed to ask, "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'll get up in a minute."

Peter pushed his arms under his back and rocked side to side.

Maurice pointed his face in the air, yelled, and sprinted forward.

Joshua could tell by the angle of Maurice's body as he prepared to jump that he wouldn't make it. Maurice's starting point was too far back, his jump too short, his crescent too straight. He tucked and rolled, but before he landed, his face skimmed the blaze and the hot metallic smell of burnt hair froze Joshua in place. Maurice somersaulted, but instead of using a hand and his knees to get up, he fell flat, the rubber tip of his tennis shoe in the hot ashes at the edge of the fire pit.

Peter shot up and dragged him away from the fire. Joshua pulled off the shoe, cooled it in the damp grass.

"Are you okay?" asked Peter. Joshua tried to breathe as little as possible to keep the burning smells out of his nose.

Maurice looked up. "I think so." A large rock was lodged in his cheek. He frowned and felt at it. He picked it out and blood poured onto his face and hand.

Peter helped Maurice back to the house while Joshua followed behind with the melted shoe.

Joshua hadn't seen Russell all day. Even his chair was missing. He kept an eye out anyway as he made his way to the cornfield, the stalks grown to just above his head. It was the most dangerous place he knew, more dangerous than the woods or the city mall or the lake, that's what he'd been told. He knew the warnings. How being lost in a cornfield higher than your head was like being lost in a blizzard. You could be two feet from the exit and never know it. If you got lost, he'd been told, don't walk in circles, don't wait for someone to find you. You may dehydrate or run out of air before that

happens. Instead, walk in as straight a line as you can and keep going and eventually you'll come to an exit. He knew the stories about kids getting lost for days, the search parties that had to go after them. Grown men walking the corn rows above their heads looking for a boy or girl, hunting dogs sniffing for their scent in acres and acres of corn, corn enough to fill Joshua's entire house and more. How the search parties almost always found them dehydrated and near death or worse, and sometimes didn't find them at all.

He'd been in corn mazes, the ones some farms made in the fall with wide pathways and low walls, to bring in a little extra money. The field was not that. A maze has a sure exit. A labyrinth will return you to the middle again and again. It has no intention of spitting you out. Joshua took a deep breath and pushed his way into the wall of corn just as he would push his way into a dense crowd.

He lost himself. He turned this way, then that, pushing what he thought was forward the whole time. Sweat prickled under his arms and along his hairline. Breathing got harder. He knew for sure he was lost. Even on his tiptoes, he couldn't see over the corn. The field wedged him in as if he were just another cornstalk.

The close, hot space made him take larger breaths as did the thin air. Straight ahead was more green jungle, down was black dirt and roots, up the cloudless sky. He stared at it for a while, trying to still his heartbeat and the fluttery feeling in his throat. Then he faced what had become front and kept walking.

He'd heard of people buried in snow mounds, digging deeper and deeper down, thinking they were headed for the surface. Except, as Russell said, they could spit and let

gravity separate up from down. Joshua could spit in the field, but it would only dehydrate him more. He'd never felt so damp and dry at the same time. He walked on.

The corn leaves scratched his bare arms, brushed his face, pulled his hair. His skin was red from heat and nerves. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. He wanted to cry. No tears came. He was exhausted. Every part of him wanted to lie down, but he knew that was the last thing he should do.

Overhead, the sky changed from blue to hazy gold to dusty pink to blue again, that time the kind of blue that signals the end of summer twilight. And he walked on, tripping over corn roots, his feet dragging even as he tried to lift them. His head got swimmy, he saw animals between the stalks. They didn't move when he came close, but disappeared when he tried to touch them. He stumbled forward, hoping he was still going straight.

He turned his face to the sky and shouted at the top of his lungs for help, and just as his vision got dark, darker than the evening, he felt the cornfield slip behind him and a cool breeze ruffle his hair. He fell to his knees at the edge of his own front yard. His parched lips twitched. He meant to speak, but no sound came. By crawling, he made it to the heavy red water spigot that rose out of the ground on a pole. The lights in the house were off, the truck in the drive. The barn lights were on. Joshua wondered if Russell had been in there the whole time, sharing his flask with Mina while his own son had been missing for hours.

Joshua pulled the spigot handle up, fumbled to unlatch it from his spot on the ground. The pole shuddered as the water blasted up and through the spigot. He gulped from the attached hose. His stomach constricted against the abundance of water and he

felt the world wobbling under him. The wicker chair was five feet away, its front legs flush with the place where yard grass stopped and field dirt started. Joshua crawled to the chair, hose doubled in his hand. He pulled himself into the seat, and let the water run. From somewhere in the field he heard a horrible cry, the grief sob of a captured animal. He gripped the chair arms until the wicker cracked and he stayed there, the thin wood digging into his hands, until the world settled.

CHAPTER 3

DESPERATE MEN

They appeared at the end of Loretta's gravel drive not long after the train rumbled through. She didn't like the looks of them. One, a wimpy-looking little man, made his way over the loose rocks on the road and his sidekick, less man than overgrown boy, lagged behind. He craned his neck looking at Loretta's high windows, slowing his step and squinting too long at each. Their faces were too slim and their posture was too slumped. Their skin too gray, soot streaked around their chins where they'd wiped their mouths.

Loretta watched them for a minute and hoped they'd be gone soon, continue down the road to panhandle at stoplights in Madison or hitch their way to Des Moines. She replaced the red lid on a small glass container, closed it up in her tallest cupboard, and scrubbed her hands with strong soap, rinsing and lathering three times before she put away her newly-made cough syrup. She took pleasure in the healing properties of the things she grew, but some of them were almost as dangerous as they were curative. When she dealt with those, she wouldn't touch anything else until she was sure her hands were clean, more for her family's safety than her own.

She went back to the window. The men were coming up her drive. Closer, their parkas were ratty, dark vinyl torn to reveal white filler at shoulders, wrists, collars. Their brown work boots were stained, and the wimpy man left his right untied. The laces

dragged through a melting slurry of snow and mud as he approached, peach-faced sidekick close behind. Although she got the occasional travelling salesman, she could tell they weren't solicitors. They had no car, no literature, no bags. The way they walked in thin clothes through the late October snow, they were used to being outdoors. Their eyes shifted, looking for something, not the straight-set eyes of someone hoping to sell a vacuum cleaner.

Loretta remembered the group of hunters who smashed her mailbox with a bat after she told them they couldn't hunt on her land. They'd had the same forward-leaning expression, the same shifty eyes.

The men were near the house now, and Loretta felt her heartbeat pick up, an uncomfortable lurch in her chest.

The wimpy one reached a grubby finger to the doorbell. The grime was deep in the creases, looked as permanent as glaze on ceramic. His hands were child-size. Loretta bet she could hold both of his in her one.

She did like always and pretended she wasn't home. Away from the window and into the dark privacy of her living room, by then heart pounding so hard her tongue could feel it.

The first chime sounded, and she winced, waited for the second chime that meant the bell had been released. It was a long time coming. For a moment, she thought the bell was broken. Then it came, the second downward tone.

"Someone's at the door," Andrew, her son, said from the top of the stairs.

"Hush," she said. She could see her son's shoes, the rest of him obscured by the landing wall. "We're not answering it."

The black and silver sneakers walked out of sight.

The bell rang again. She glared at the front door. "Go away," she said under her breath. The battered mailbox flashed through her mind, aluminum top smashed, door bent in, flag hanging off, more like a wad of paper than mailbox when she found it.

Another chime. "I don't want to deal with you," she whispered.

Growing up, she'd gotten good at this game. Waiting out the danger as her mother stomped around the house and her father gazed unfocused at the television. For a long time she hadn't known what made her mother so scary. She was loud and coarse with her father, but she was always sweet to Loretta. It was something instinctive, a sharp electricity at home, that told Loretta to be afraid. And she had been right to be. She felt that same electricity again, and she knew she could only wait.

Silence. She thought they may have left. She stood, crept to the window, strained to see without being seen. A tuft of hair, a quilted parka arm, a small pointed nose. They were still there.

The doorknob clattered. She jumped so far her shoes almost came off. She froze, felt the way she did in a bathroom when someone tried the door. Denuded, vulnerable, willing the door to stay shut, glad she'd locked it. Tiny neck hairs rose.

"We know you're in there." She figured the little one had said it, the one in charge. His voice was surprising, papery. Like the rasp of onion peel. The door jumped away from its frame then back in place. She got to the window in time to see the big one swing his leg up and kick just below the knob. She ran and put her weight against the door. It jumped again. It was old. If it wasn't shut just right, the latch didn't catch and the wind would blow it open.

With each jolt from the outside she heard tiny cracking noises. Her heart beat in her ears.

"Get a run at it," said the paper voice.

She braced herself against the door, hands in the frame, same as she'd been taught to do in case of tornado. The impact started in her left kidney and pushed her flat against the wall.

They were inside. One of them grabbed her wrist, pulled her into the kitchen. He was still wimpy-looking, and she felt she might have the upper hand if her whole body wasn't vibrating. She did a self-check. No bumps or scratches. Everything moved okay.

He turned to face her. He had needle teeth. Long and thin and gray. She tore her eyes from them.

"Sit," he said, and pushed her into a chair.

She could feel a scream in her lungs, but she kept her lips together so the kids wouldn't come down. As long as they didn't find the kids, she could deal with anything else.

"What do you want?" she asked.

The wimpy one smiled at his sidekick. Close up, she could see the pale fuzz grew thick on the big one's young, pockmarked face. When he turned his head, light caught the hair, made it look more like fur than fuzz.

"Is that how you treat your guests?" the wimpy one asked. He leaned in, almost touched noses with her. She kept her eyes off his terrible teeth. "We've travelled a long way to get here. You could at least give us a how do you do."

"How do you do." Her voice was flat and she cringed away from him, but he seemed satisfied.

"I've been better, but thank you. I'm Jones and this here's Krog. You?"

"Loretta." His eyes were locked on hers, and it would have been better if there had been no warmth in them. The kind glint she saw instead rattled her. She tried to think what was nearby that could be a weapon.

"Well, that's fine. Miss Loretta, Krog and I are going to ask a few simple things from you. Give us what we ask for and everything will okie doke, understand?"

Loretta nodded. She was conscious to look straight ahead, keep her face muscles lax, make eye contact with both of them. Each time she looked at Krog, he looked away, pretended to study some knickknacks on the hutch or the hanging plate her mother painted.

Jones stood back and rubbed his tiny, dirty hands together. "First thing we need," he said, "is a promise."

He leaned forward from the waist, his eyes wide and earnest. She gazed back. She knew she was supposed to ask what kind of promise, but she wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

After a moment, he said again, "A promise, a promise."

She gazed back, gave no reaction, acted like her kids did when they pretended they hadn't heard.

And he was on her. He grabbed around her neck. A blade switched inches from her nose. "Don't you want to know what kind of promise?" He breathed in her ear and she fought the urge to squirm against the moisture his warm breath left as it cooled.

"What kind of promise?" she asked, surprised she could still speak when she was sure she had swallowed her tongue.

He released her. The blade was gone. "A promise, a promise," he said. "You know, it's very hard to trust other people. Trusting makes you vulnerable. So I think the only true way to promise something is with a pinky." He held his out. "I know it sounds juvenile. Schoolgirls make pinky promises. But they don't really mean it. When you truly make your pinky your promise, that's a hard promise to break. For the sake of your pinky, I mean."

He looked at Loretta's hands folded in her lap. She was embarrassed she'd been rubbing her right pinky hard enough for it to turn red. He saw it and smiled at her, showed his needle teeth.

Krog took her mother's plate from its wall hanger. She wanted to say something, wanted to take to it from him to keep it safe, but he handled it with extreme care, his large cracked hands petting the porcelain. "I want this," Krog said. His voice was rough like his hands, and it echoed. Loretta had never heard an echo in her kitchen before. She glanced at the stairs, hoping the kids hadn't heard, wouldn't come down.

Loretta could tell Jones was annoyed Krog had interrupted his flow.

"We're not here for plates," said Jones.

"I want it," said Krog. He pulled a dirty knapsack from his coat pocket and slid the plate inside.

"Please," said Loretta. "My mother painted that."

Krog looked at her full on for the first time, and she saw how painfully young he was. He couldn't be much older than Andrew. It was impossible to tell what he was

thinking, or even whether his mind was quick or slow behind his heavy-lidded, fuzzy face. He took the plate out, set it on the table, looked away from her again.

"I need a Bible," said Jones.

Loretta took a minute to answer, made herself look in Jones's face. "There isn't one," she said. The only Bible her family had ever owned had been her mother's, and after she found out what her mother was and what she must be as well, she'd thrown it out. Monsters have no business with the word of God.

"Excuse me?" Jones looked down his nose, his mouth twisted in disgust.

"We don't own one."

"Christ," he said. "Fine, just give me your pinky." He grabbed for it.

"Wait," she said. She snatched her hand away. "What am I promising?"

No cue from Jones, Krog stepped forward and grabbed her hand. He splayed it on the table and held down the pinky. Jones hooked it with his own, twisted until pain shot up Loretta's arm.

"This is a promise that Miss Loretta won't do anything stupid," he said. "Agreed?"

When she didn't agree right away, he squeezed her pinky tighter and pulled. She could feel his ragged nail mark her skin. She sucked in her breath. He twisted more and she felt her pinky crackling, contorted into an unnatural position. She nodded.

"Good," he said, and dropped her finger.

"What do you two want?" she asked. "Surely you want something."

"What we want right now," said Jones, "is to not go around looking like this." He gestured at his own raggy clothes. "Let's go."

A small swayback girl runs to her mother where she sits at a makeup table, applying mascara and lipstick.

"Your father isn't feeling well," her mother says. "He needs some medicine." She hands an opaque bottle to the girl. "The whole thing. He doesn't like the taste. Put it in some soup. That's my good girl."

Her mother holds her chin, paints the girl's lips the same color as her own.

Downstairs, the girl heats a can of soup. She dumps the bottle's contents in. The liquid that comes out is toxic green, and she hesitates. It turns the soup a cloudy brown. Some of her own medicines have strange colors, though. Yellow, pink, sludgy black. She takes the bowl to her father where he lies on the couch. He accepts it, ruffles her hair with a weak hand, and tries to grasp the spoon. He cannot. She feeds him, a tiny spoonful at a time, until he falls asleep.

In the closet, no single item could be pulled from the pile without two others coming with. Jones and Krog worked to unknot the pieces of fabric, to find sock pairs, and finally gave up. They pushed Loretta out and shut the door.

She needed a weapon. The wide mouth of the fireplace was in front of her, swept clean. No poker, no shovel, but there was still the cast iron basket full of firewood. Glancing at the closet door, she dove for the hearth, pulling wood from the basket as soon as her hands were near. She never hesitated. She had the ability to harm. She'd learned that a young age.

As she removed the last log and picked up the empty basket, the closet door swung open and they emerged, mismatched in her husband's clothes. Krog nearly busted the buttons of the too-long flannel shirt he wore over a pair of tuxedo pants she hadn't

seen in years. The waffled cuffs of long underwear poked out beneath. Jones, his frame lost somewhere inside a maroon dress shirt, the arms coming well over his hands, smiled until she could see all his back teeth were missing. The jeans were so long he had to roll them, exposing two different colors of dress socks pulled to his lower shins. They put their canvas work boots on and Jones tucked the end of his pants inside. It was ridiculous and if she hadn't been about to wet herself, Loretta would have had a hard time not laughing. As it was, the clothes made them look unhinged, their glares more threatening, and it scared her mouth dry.

Her hands clenched the iron basket rim. She lifted it, ready to swing.

"That was stupid," said Jones. He pushed the sleeves above his elbows and shoved her down, her cheek pressed against iron. He grabbed her left wrist, yanked it behind her. Pain shot through her elbow, fear through her core as he grabbed her pinky.

"Can't you keep a promise at all?" He sounded sad, a disappointed friend instead of a deranged invader. "You remember our agreement." He closed a fist around her pinky.

Cate appeared in the corner of Loretta's vision. Her eyes were wide, her mouth open. A piece of paper settled on the floor where it had fallen from her hand. Neither Krog nor Jones had noticed her yet. Loretta shook her head, a small motion, trying not to make it seem like the answer to Jones's question.

"Mom?" Cate said.

Jones, his hands still holding tight, snapped his head toward Cate. Krog's whole body turned toward her.

"Well looky here," said Jones. "Hi kid."

"Mom, who is that?"

"Cate, go back to your room," Loretta said.

She heard Cate scuffle out.

"No, no," said Jones. "We might need her help." Loretta felt Krog's heavy footsteps move across the carpet, saw her daughter's legs in front of the stone hearth.

"Let her go back to her room," said Loretta. She isn't going to cause trouble." She knew the vein in her forehead was bulging.

Jones snorted. "I've heard that recently. Which brings us back to the matter at hand." He squeezed hers, made sure she caught the pun.

"Cate," he said, "this is why you don't break promises."

Loretta's pinky switched hands. Large callouses, rough as a cheese grater, replaced Jones's slimy damp skin.

The grandfather clock in the corner ticked. Cate's breathing was hard but steady. Loretta's heartbeat clanged inside her chest, her head, her pinky. Each second dragged out in the heavy room. If he was going to do it, she wished he just would.

She heard a snap, a sick sound, and she knew it was done. At first, she felt nothing. She looked at Cate, smiled. Then blazing pain and she was on the floor clutching at her hand. Voices were screaming. She wished they wouldn't. She realized her mouth was open. She closed it and only one voice screamed on. She looked at her pinky pointed out in an impossible angle. She tried to move it. Couldn't. She looked up at Jones. "You bastard."

His brow was creased, he looked concerned. She wanted to spit at him but she couldn't find moisture in her mouth.

Andrew walked in and froze.

"There's another one." Krog pointed.

"Come on in," said Jones. His needle teeth bit his smile.

"Miss Loretta." He grabbed her shoulders and shook a little. She felt like puking, the bile rising high in the back of her throat. She swallowed to keep it down. "I trust you will please keep your promises from now on."

A small girl tries to wake her father. It seems like he's been sleeping for a long time. She wonders if he needs more medicine. His skin is a blanched yellow in the dim room. She turns off the television, turns on a lamp. His color does not change. The room, she realizes, is silent. She can't hear him breathe.

Her mother floats in. Strange, she's much calmer the past weeks. She lowers her ear to her husband's mouth and smiles.

"Daddy's sleeping," she says. "Go ahead and play. That's my girl."

The girl sees a shadow in her mother's eyes she does not like. She wants to call a doctor, but her mother would never do that, and she's her mother's girl.

In the bathroom off the kitchen, Jones taped Loretta's pinky to her ring finger. Loretta fought against her reflexes to keep still. Her hand felt dirty in his. She couldn't wait to wash it and rebandage after he was gone. She couldn't wait to wash the entire house. She knew she wouldn't feel calm until every fiber from Jones and Krog had been scoured away. She concentrated on the oils she knew for disinfecting. Lavender. Lemon verbena. Cinnamon. Clove.

"There you go." Jones finished the wrap with a flourish. He walked out into the kitchen and she knew she was supposed to follow. She scanned the bathroom for

anything sharp. Toenail clippers, cuticle scissors, even the metal end of a nail file. Nothing. Just soap and bandages. She kept her eyes open as she went in the kitchen. If she saw anything she could reach, she would use it. She would let her monster loose.

Cate and Andrew sat at the kitchen table, in their usual dinner places. Cate perched at the front of her chair, Andrew slumped at the back of his. Their eyes shifted from each other to Jones and back to Loretta. She smiled at them, a tiny motion, the only way to give them some reassurance.

Krog's head was hidden in the shallow pantry.

"Enough for five, Krog," Jones said.

Krog came out with his arms full. A huge pack of noodles and two bottles of marinara sauce. He set it down and looked at Loretta.

"Spaghetti," he said. He went to the fridge and found ground beef and a little parmesan left in the bottom of a container. He put them on the counter and motioned at them, then Loretta.

She hesitated in front of the ingredients. Her head hummed. The names on the packages were blurry. She cooked the family meal every night but she found herself at a loss. She couldn't remember how to make spaghetti.

Jones opened the cabinets, got out silverware and plates and went to set the table.

Krog pulled things from the spice cabinet. Oregano, basil, pepper. Cate went over, looked at his selection, then up at the cabinet full of bottles, jars, vials. Krog stiffened and looked ready to fight, but Cate shook her head. "Get the marjoram," she said.

Krog's shoulders dropped and he nodded.

He found the marjoram and put it next to the other bottles, smiled at Cate.

"And the garlic powder," Cate said, stretching, pointing in its vicinity.

He retrieved it and set it down close to her. He gave the lid an extra tap and smiled again.

She thought a second. Flipped her hair. "And something red," she said. "We need something red, right?" She set her hand down close to his.

Krog's went straight to the cayenne and he put it on the counter, confident in his choice. When Cate frowned, he frowned too.

"I don't like spicy stuff," she said. "Something else red."

He looked again, and Loretta gave Cate a sharp look that Cate ignored. There was nothing red that wasn't spicy. Finally Krog pulled down a small vial. The top was red. He put it in Cate's hands, his face hopeful. When she smiled at him, he grinned back.

The air got thin and Loretta coughed, tried to breathe normally. She tracked her daughter's steps to the counter, watched the vial bob toward her, full of tiny bottle of black cherry seeds. Poisonous things, rough and dark, almost like coffee beans behind the glass.

"Here, Mom," Cate said, a little too loud. "Put this in." She tucked the bottle in Loretta's hands. Loretta shook her head at Cate, eyes wide. Cate smiled, nodded, too bright, and opened the marinara sauce.

Andrew dumped the beef in a frying pan. Jones and Krog sat at the counter on two high stools, like every other guest the family had to dinner. Cate walked behind Loretta, set a heavy pot full of water on the stove. Loretta watched her and Cate dipped

her face down, avoided her mother's look. Hips leaned against the stove, Cate watched the water climb to its slow boil, never took her eyes off the heating pot.

The unmistakable sound of burbling water, and Loretta saw Cate's eye slant. Loretta's body knew before her mind did, and she reached out to stop Cate's hand, to halt the force of boiling water slinging through the air. As she dove to stop the action, she saw Andrew there too, holding his sister's arm and watching the water arc across the kitchen right past its target. As it hit the floor, the jumping droplets must have hit Krog's leg because he winced and jumped to his feet.

Cate held the hot pan over her head like a baseball bat. In one long reach, Krog grabbed her batting arm and punched her straight on. Loretta heard an ugly crunch as his fist connected with the fine bones in her daughter's face. Cate fell to the floor. The pan clattered next to her head. Loretta felt her chest turn to steel and she stepped forward, a battering ram ready to break Krog in. Andrew jumped up and grabbed Loretta around the waist, pulled her away from Krog, toward Cate.

Her face was already beginning to swell, her right eye puffy and red, the blood vessels smashed and angry under the skin. Loretta grazed a finger across and Cate cried out. Loretta snapped up to her full height.

"Andrew," she said. "Get your sister some ice. Lots of ice."

She swung her gaze to the two men, rested it on them until even she was uncomfortable. "You want spaghetti?" She could hear her words, the syllables dripping with so much hatred they took longer than usual to say.

The men nodded. There was a change in their demeanor, she thought. Their eyes seemed wider, their bodies swung away from hers, but she couldn't be sure. Krog's arm

muscles seemed smaller, Jones's torso even thinner. The smell in the room seemed changed, the quality of air. Loretta took advantage of the shift.

"I'll give you spaghetti," she said. "Then you get the fuck out."

She snatched the pot from the floor and ran more water into it. She stomped around the kitchen. Slammed cabinets open and shut for no reason except to hear them echo in the silent room. When the water boiled, she snapped the dry spaghetti twigs against her knee, ignored the throbbing in her pinky and her head. She threw the pasta in the pot, pushed it down with a wooden spoon.

She could do it. Drop a few cherry seeds into their bowls and let their teeth break through to the cyanide inside. How many would it take to kill an adult? Two or three? She looked at them. Krog cleaned his fingernails with a toothpick he found on the counter. Jones, one leg bent over the other, alternated watching Loretta and fixing his puddled shirtsleeves. She could grate the seeds over their two bowls. Grate until the seeds were gone, ten times the amount she would ever use for a cough suppressant. She could do it. Her mother had shown her how.

She felt herself twist, distort into that swayback child she'd been then. Her shoulders hunched, her hips sank and jutted forward. Her mother would be pleased to know that after all, she was her mother's girl.

The bottle felt slick and cold against her hand and she felt her stomach go the same way. Her father's vomiting, his sluggish movements and mind, the way his skin puffed up so much she could poke it down like dough, and the blood that stained the couch when his body was finally moved.

Her own daughter's calm expression as she handed her the vial.

Swung the pot of boiling water at another human being.

"Come on. We're hungry, lady." Krog rocked in his chair a little. She looked him in the eye and moved to the pantry for the thyme. She wouldn't do it. It would cost too much. She stood up straight, squared her shoulders, and shook away the monster that had almost held her in its teeth.

Loretta poured the steaming marinara sauce over pasta in five bowls. The smell followed her from the kitchen to the table, as did Jones and Krog, Cate and Andrew. The smell was rich and made her salivate even though her appetite had disappeared.

The table was meant to seat four. Without a word, Andrew dragged in the piano bench and placed it perpendicular to make a single seat. Loretta sat at the head and the rest of them squeezed in front of a bowl, Cate and Andrew next to Loretta. Krog and Jones shared the other end. Cate had to scoot far to her left to keep Krog's elbow from rubbing hers. The side of her face Loretta could see was shiny and swollen, the eye clamped closed.

Steam from the bowls rose between Loretta and the men, softened their features, warmed their skin. She watched them both breathe in deep, and she noticed it for the first time. Jones's hollow cheeks, the bags under Krog's eyes, the tightness in their lips. The way they hunched over their bowl like dogs guarding food from others who would take it away.

Krog made a move toward his food. Jones grabbed his wrist to stop him, studying Loretta under lowered eyebrows.

"You first," Jones said.

The thought of eating made Loretta's stomach turn.

Her nervous and digestive systems in too much turmoil, but she twirled a small forkful of spaghetti to her mouth and chewed small bites, mincing the pasta with her front teeth.

As soon as she swallowed, they dug in. Using more hand than fork, they shoveled sauce, meat, pasta down their throats without chewing. Cate and Andrew sat in silence, glanced at each other across the table, poked fork tips at their dinner. Loretta watched tomato sauce stain the white tablecloth and saw the men as they were. Driven to her house and violence by need. They had clothes. They had food. It was time for them to go.

"I used bay leaves tonight," she said, raising her voice above the animal noises coming from the other end of the table.

Krog and Jones slowed down a little and looked at her, but they still shoveled food in by the forkful.

"They tend to make things taste more like what they are," she said. "Did you know, though, they've also been associated with good luck and warding off evil?"

Jones shook his head, polite. "Didn't know that," he said, still swallowing.

Loretta stared down at the red sauce in her own bowl, flecked with seasonings: basil, garlic, parsley. Her usual spaghetti recipe.

"Oh yes," she said. "Garlic though, garlic as you know has a strong smell."

The men nodded and ate on. Krog let out a burp that made Andrew pull farther away, and went back to his bowl.

"Such a strong smell," Loretta said, "that Horace, the Roman poet, said it was more poisonous than hemlock." She smiled at them, made sure to pull her lips back far

enough that all her teeth showed. The forks were still. From her seat, Loretta could see that their bowls were close to empty.

A loud gurgle interrupted the moment's silence. Jones and Krog both stared at their stomachs, as if unsure which one the sound came from.

Loretta kept her smile on. "And tomatoes actually belong to the nightshade family. You know, deadly nightshade. For a long time people thought eating tomatoes could actually kill you."

Krog leaned back in his chair, one hand on his stomach, looking pained. "Jones, I don't feel so good," he whispered. Jones didn't answer, just stifled a hiccup and pushed his bowl forward.

Loretta stared at the men until she felt she had to look away. She kept smiling and tilted her head.

"Seconds?" Without waiting for an answer, she scooped up their dishes and piled in more food.

Bowls back on the table, she sprinkled a little parsley over the sauce. "I was in a hurry before, but it looks much nicer with a little parsley on top," she said.

Jones and Krog nodded and mumbled something that sounded like thanks. They picked up their forks and moved the pasta around their bowls.

"Now parsley, let's see. There are several kinds of most herbs, but the kind of parsley originally grown here was called plain-leaved parsley."

Krog and Jones looked up, as if expecting more, but Loretta stayed quiet and did her best to wear a normal expression. She took another bite of her dinner and heard them exhale as if they'd been holding the same breath. Jones's shoulders relaxed. Krog sat up

and took another bite. Loretta waited until Jones did too before she continued. "Of course, that particular type looks a lot like what they call Fool's Parsley, which is actually a very poisonous weed."

Jones jumped up and spit a large mangled pasta ball into his bowl. Krog's hand went to his neck as he coughed. Jones took a step forward, mouth open. Loretta widened her eyes. Her smile returned.

Jones stepped back. One eye on her, he said, "Krog, I'd say it's time for us to be moving on."

They disappeared around the corner toward the front door.

Loretta stood and followed them to the entryway. "Wait, I haven't even told you about scorpions and basil yet."

The room shook with the front door slam. Loretta ran to put a heavy chair under the handle. But there was no need. She went to the window in time to see two figures running the direction of town. They'd already covered a large distance, but they were close enough for her to see when they stopped and stuck their fingers down their throats.

In the living room, Cate cried into the couch, cupped ice to her swollen face. Andrew reached to touch her, then brought his hand back and held it. Loretta pulled her daughter close, pressed the good cheek to her shoulder. She ran fingers through Cate's hair. Tears made her neck damp. Cate took a deep breath and Loretta felt it release hot against her shoulder. The sobbing stopped.

Cate twisted as if to let go, but Loretta held on and she stopped. Loretta rubbed her back. "That's my girl," she said. She hoped.

CHAPTER 4

SÉANCE

All her blessings are in ceramic pots on the bathroom floor. Gabby writes them down on colorful scraps of paper and throws them into the big earthenware containers labeled according to the kind of blessing, the scraps color-coordinated as well. The pots sit around the baseboard, line up beside the toilet and tub, leave only a pathway to the sink. A few are filled to the brim. Others wait for their first paper scrap. Most are somewhere in between.

A second layer of blessing pots and then a third built up over time, and now she squeezes, sidles, picks her way from the tub, where the nearest paper scraps—a banana yellow—are laminated but still smeared underneath with ink that has run. Now she slips to the sink to floss her teeth. Now to the trashcan further than an arm's reach away. Now out the door that will barely move, stuck in a half swing position, for all the clutter.

Blessing one. The first pot she made, which sat alone in the bathroom for months and filled with paper scraps long before the others. It was the only thing she could think of at first. The words, like those on all the pots, stand out in a large bold uppercase font carved into the side while the clay was still moist. YOU ARE LITERATE. Blue scraps of paper, light like rosemary flowers, fill the pot, and remind her of the lines on the college ruled sheets she used as she made curve after painstaking curve to spell out the

truth and then the letters of her name on a hasty statement right after the accident, now almost three years ago.

Gabby clears some space on her bed so she can sit down. She shovels back a mound of magazines, their glossy covers slipping against and into one another, pushing each other open to the slick pages that fold and crush under the weight of more magazines. Colorful titles and images of grinning animals slip out from between the pages. A centerfold orangutan, eating nits, falls onto her pillow. Dolphin skin, fat, tissue falls away in a drawing to reveal bone and muscles underneath. Gabby closes the dolphin in the pages and tosses the magazine on the floor. The rest threaten to shift in the pile, to skate back down on top of each other and resume their spots in a single layer on the comforter. She faces the pile, straightens her arms, and holds her hands up, fingers bent at their very tips, imagining energy from her hands will sturdy the precarious pile.

"Stay," she whispers, hisses.

Gently, gingerly, and with every other soft g adverb she can think of, she sits down. The bed creaks and the comforter shifts under her weight, but the magazines hold.

YOU GOT HERE WITHOUT INJURY. Blessing two.

A cellophane pack full of different-colored papers sits next to the bed. Also another in her car, one next to the television, and a small one in her purse. She reaches out and rips off a piece of cherry red. Pressing hard, in blue pen she writes: "Bed, magazines." Then the date. She places the red scrap next to her alarm clock on the bedside table to be filed in the appropriate jar next time she ventures into the bathroom. She wedges the jagged piece in the only crevice left between a pill bottle and an almost-empty box of tissues. A ball of yarn sits collecting dust nearby. It doesn't belong there,

she knows, and it bothers her, but it's one of the only places where she's sure she can find it again, and she's always meant to take up crochet.

She works her way from the bedroom, down the hall, into the kitchen, following the path she has made for herself through her piles of collections around the house. For the most part, these items are organized by category: sports equipment, posters, empty gift boxes, etc.

In the kitchen, she gets out a tattered piece of paper and rereads it. The guidelines to her escape from this place, to a chance to start again. The deadline is soon.

A scratching noise that has been bothering her the last few days picks up again. Now she thinks she hears the faintest footsteps. Or maybe she's imagining it. Her head starts pounding, her palms are sweaty and the back of her neck is hot. She stuffs the paper back in a drawer and hurries out to her car.

Gabby slams the front door behind her to get the attention of someone in the wood-paneled, musty restaurant. The bell at the top of the doorframe jangles crazily. A gigantic ram head directs its glassy eyes at her from behind the bar, a pink bra hanging from the top of one of its curved horns. In a few weeks, for Christmas, it will wear a Santa hat, she remembers. Then, for New Year's a top hat and sparkly lens-less glasses that display the numbers of the upcoming year. And probably, by the end of that night, a few more bras will cling to its horns, like Lisa's purple-spotted one did that night they came in to celebrate when Carl was still alive.

She runs her hand over the oily vinyl booth closest to her, wipes at a crumb on the thick glass covering the tablecloth.

A young girl, circles under eyes.

Lank hair tucked behind her ears, waitress apron tied around her waist, pokes her head out of the kitchen. "We're not open yet."

"Door was open," Gabby says.

The girl shakes her head. "I can't take your order yet. Kitchen opens at six, bar at five."

"I know," says Gabby. She used to show up right at five each Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, take that end stool in front of the tap handles and wait for her semi-cold glass of wheat beer. Or sit across from Carl in one of these booths with the fabric that feels like greasy flesh and whisper in the dim room about things that seemed important then.

"It's not five. It's a quarter to." The girl seems unnerved by Gabby, seems worried that she won't leave.

"Just get Stovall," Gabby says, and sits at a booth.

The girl gives her a hard look. Gabby pretends to examine the appetizer specials. After a few seconds, while Gabby's breath bounces in the back of her throat instead of moving in and out as normal, the waitress turns on her heel and Gabby finally breathes out.

Stovall pokes his head out of the kitchen. "How are you, Gabby?"

She skips the small talk. "I need a rabbit."

"A rabbit?" He walks over and sits down across from her. He has to work to squeeze his stomach in between the booth seat and the table, and his black chef's uniform wrinkles and scrunches against his efforts.

"Yes. I don't care if it's not your tenderest. I'm going to parboil it."

"Parboil?"

Gabby remembers now his annoying habit of repeating single words back. His face has changed over the time since she's seen him, acquired more lines somehow, and an ashen quality, as if he exfoliated his skin with cinders this morning.

"For my signature dish. I've decided on Norfolk fried rabbit with hot pepper aioli."

His face changes and, for a second, to Gabby, he looks young again. Not quite a smile, but not the gruff expression he's had since he first saw her again in his restaurant. "That was Carl's signature dish."

"Yes."

Under the table, his foot paws at the ground. A sign he's nervous.

"Well, that's good, Gab. Carl would probably be—"

She interrupts him. "So, what about that rabbit?"

In one of the large pockets of her apron, she fingers a light mint scrap of paper, the blessing already written out and ready to go into its pot. Someday.

Gabby sits on the edge of the bathtub, with her jeans rolled up to her knees and a layer of warm water under her feet. The doll she's cleaning lies across her lap, its moveable eyelids winking and blinking. She stores the dolls in the closet and cleans them in the tub. It's one of the last clear places in the house. She used to have her own doll restoring station, down in the basement next to Carl's exercise equipment room, but that's long been piled over with old desks and chairs and a lifetime's collection of checked picnic blankets and woven baskets. The toothbrush bristles move over the doll's

glass eyes, working out the years of grime it collected before it ended up in her cart at the local thrift shop.

She stopped at that thrift shop yesterday before coming home from Stovall's restaurant. She pushed a lightweight, rickety cart between the crowded aisles, picking out treasures every few feet. A white illustrated thimble with gold in the small indentations at the top, a faded turquoise hand beater that sticks a little, a few records with brightly-colored labels, because she's always meant to get a record player, a floral sundress with the tags still on—she has a closetful of these somewhere at home, tags on still, and this one is a size too small, but it was just too pretty to leave. And the doll, one eye peeking out between a few tattered books and an old plastic bowling set. She pulled it out and shook out the pinafore skirt it wore. The hair needed some work, and the face was grimy as if it had been sitting in a gutter for a good year, but it could be worth some money, cleaned up and photographed in the right light.

She puts the doll down on the edge of the sink. YOU LOVE YOUR JOB. These words emblazon the pot that sits behind the bathroom door, meant to be collecting lightly colored scraps, and one in particular, but nothing inside yet. Gabby picks the pot up, examines it. Considers throwing it in the backyard with the other things she's been meaning to throw away. Decides against it, but maybe eventually.

A year ago, the day the investigation ended, Lisa came over. Gabby watched her face stretch in disbelief as she looked around the house, then scrunch as she forced it back to a normal expression. She didn't say anything about the piles of objects already collecting in every space of every room, just stepped down the path Gabby pointed out to her and made a seat for herself on the living room couch. A stuffed animal, a fox,

bounced into her lap, and she held it during their conversation, her knuckles white against her grip on its torso.

"Here," Lisa said, "I found this and thought of you." She held out a piece of printed paper with "Count Your Blessings" in huge letters at the top.

"Thanks, Lisa, but I'm not too sure what I have to be thankful for."

"Your statement kept you from going to jail. Start with that."

At the time, Gabby remembered the extreme calm she felt, digging out a piece of notebook paper, writing down the facts, signing and dating it.

Now, she remembers she wrote up her note before she even dialed 9-1-1.

Gabby follows a cleared path from the bathroom through the hall and the living room, past stacked plastic tubs, and through piles of furniture: lamps, folding chairs, TV dinner trays, and into the kitchen. She navigates her way to the stovetop, stepping over piles of old cereal boxes, most with the plastic liner and sugary dust at the bottom still in tact. At one point, they were all neatly stacked, but months of her shuffling around has changed that. They're all in reasonably good shape, though, not many crushed or torn, which is the important thing. She keeps them for the box tops. She's always meant to cut them off and send them in to help local schools.

Grease spatters, yellow, red, brown, dot the stovetop, stick to burner grates, collect into hardening pools in the drip pans, the product of countless one pot dinners from months past when she still cooked at home. She slides the take out boxes off the sticky white enamel of the stove surface and onto the floor, the crusted brown bits of rice and cornstarch, petrified strings of cheese, dried-out ends of buns, rattling inside as their containers drop. She stands on an empty pizza box and digs a saucepan out of the bottom

cabinet, slams the door fast before all the pots and pans in assorted sizes fall on the gritty, sticky, stained floor. Muted thuds sound from inside as aluminum handles hit the cabinet door.

Milk sloshes as Gabby sets the large bowl on top of some mostly-flattened cereal boxes on the counter nearest the stove. These boxes are worse for the wear, the faces of celebrities and mascots soaked dark with cooking grease. The milk from the fridge was yellow and sour last night when Gabby filled the mixing bowl. She dumped the congealed milk in the overflowing sink, aiming under a few dirty plates in hopes of hitting the drain. She had picked up a new carton on her way home, and it was so damp with condensation by the time she was able to move somewhat freely in the kitchen that the receipt stuck in a soggy strip to the plastic. She filled the bowl again with the new milk, which yellowed at the edges when it hit the remnants of old milk. A quick stir made the color uniform. The rabbit chunks plopped in one by one, splashing milk onto the stove to join the other spills and stains. She covered the bowl and made room in the part of the moldy refrigerator she had cleaned just for this.

Now she pulls out what she hopes is a clean cutting board from the edge of the sink and lays the milky rabbit carcass out. Front legs, back legs, belly flap, loin chopped into three parts, two fillets. With a sigh, she slices off a piece of rancid rabbit fat from part of the loin the butcher missed.

After a few minutes, boiling water makes a steady babbling noise on the back burner. Stovall gave her the oldest, toughest, gamiest hare from the restaurant freezer the day before, spots of freezer burn like large moles already forming on the meat's surface. She sniffs the meat, scrapes with a butter knife at the surface of the tough freezer burn,

and salts the boiling water, using up the salt in the shaker and dumping out the last from an old rattling box she finds in the pantry.

She drops the rabbit chunks in the water and sets the timer to count up from 0:00:00. Goes to fill out another cherry red scrap blessing.

Gabby's been perched on the edge of the couch for half an hour, waiting for the rabbit to be tender. She thought it would be done in fifteen minutes, but when she checked she wasn't sure, so she decided to give it another fifteen. Trying not to crush or topple the pile of stuffed animals behind her, she readjusts her weight. Most of the animals are torn or stained, their button eyes drooping on the ends of black thread stalks, their once snow-white chest fur stained inexplicably brown with drips like soy sauce, although she doesn't eat her dinners here. Those she eats standing up, holding the takeout box, in the kitchen, or upstairs on the edge of her bed, kicking the takeout containers underneath when her stomach's full. The faded animal fur keeps peeking into her peripheral vision as she tries to watch contestants compete for a fortune on the TV. The stack of plush looming over her head and shoulders reminds her, with a pang of guilt, that she always meant to mend the toys and store them in an airtight tub in the attic. Preserve them for later. But she's better at fixing things she can sell than anything she keeps for herself.

YOUR CHILDREN LOVE YOU. Gabby has two cats, Hodge and Podge, and she supposes that they love her, in the best way cats can. She often refers to them as one, and HodgePodge seems to be doing alright, although she hasn't seen them in a couple days. She's lost sleep the last few nights, curled into a corner of the slippery magazines and clutching the small bit of bedding that pokes out from underneath the pile, imagining

something falling on HodgePodge, flattening them to a cat pancake, where she'll find them in the morning in the middle of her path from bedroom to living room or hall to kitchen.

"Hodge!" she calls over the host of the cooking show, whose voice is low and ominous, about to announce who's been cut this time. "Podge! HodgePodge! Tch tch tch, here kitties!"

Nothing. She sits up a little straighter on the couch.

"Tch tch tch!"

If she had a can of tuna, she could lure them out of hiding, scribble out another scrap of persimmon paper reaffirming the cats' winnable, if conditional, love. But her pantry holds only stale crackers and oxidizing chocolate chips with a chalky white layer, piles of opened paper plate packages and stacks of Styrofoam cups. She thinks about trying to coax them out of hiding with the milk the rabbit meat soaked in, still sitting on the edge of the kitchen counter.

A light blue plush bear teeters on the pile above her, behind her, and falls, bouncing off her shoulder. She sets him back on top of the pile.

Sizzling from the kitchen tells her the rabbit is boiling over.

NO HALLUCINATIONS. YOU ARE HEALTHY. No, sometimes she still sees him, behind the translucent changing screen, sitting on top of the junk pile now occupying his office chair, at the end of the hall as she walks to the bedroom with an armful of clothes. Behind her in the mirror as she tweezes her eyebrows, gone again when she spins around. Hears his hammer pounding on the shed.

After the accident, she covered Carl's exercise equipment first.

Floor to ceiling, she kept carrying things down to that room in the basement until she couldn't see the treadmill, balance ball, and most of all the bench and barbells. She filled the basement to the brim and shut the door. But after midnight, she hears bumps and thuds from down there, and she knows he comes in the night and clears all the clutter away, shaking his head at her as he does so. Doesn't she want to spot him on his bench press?

"What about last time," she answers, whispers to her covers.

"That?" He laughs, deep and full-bellied, like he hasn't skipped a day of their life together. "That was an accident. I'll be more careful this time."

She pulls what covers she can over her head and counts up from zero until she falls asleep, but the noises have been increasing the last few nights, and it's been harder and harder.

For now, she fills the blessing pot with good reports from her doctor check-ups.

Every morning, she grasps the handle on the basement door, turns it, makes sure it's still locked.

Almost three years ago, she went pounding down the carpet basement stairs for the last time. She needed one of the long plastic boxes she used to ship restored dolls across the country, she had to mail a package that afternoon. She stooped at the bottom to pick up a pile of household items that had accumulated there. Tape, scissors, a sock, a yellow highlighter. As she straightened, she heard a strained noise, almost a gargle, but distinctly two syllables. She paused and listened, wondering if it came from the pipes overhead. It came again, and she froze as she recognized the familiar quality of sound as Carl's voice, and the strangled syllables as her name.

The light was on in Carl's weight room, and she ran toward it. Scissors, tape, sock, highlighter scattered across the basement floor.

Carl's hands were flat under the bar, straining against its weight. Exertion showed red around the top edges of his palm and white across his lifeline as the bar pushed back, 400 pounds strong, against his muscles. Flat on his back, Carl held the heavy piece of metal inches away from the soft flesh of his throat, the cords of his neck stretched taut, sweat pouring from his forehead.

Gabby screamed and ran over to the bench. She pulled hard on the bar, braced her heels against the floor, yanked with both arms.

Carl's arm muscles trembled, and the bar dropped lower.

Sobbing, Gabby ran around his side and fumbled with the clips holding the weights in place on either side of the bar. His muscles quivered and the bar hovered just above his neck, grazed his Adam's apple.

"Tilt the bar!" she yelled through tears that burned her eyes. "Please, if you can just tilt it to one side."

He never said another word, just stared at her. His look was so calm that for a second her fingers stopped as she forgot the clip she was trying to undo.

The bar landed with a thud. Carl's hands dangled onto the floor beneath the bench.

Gabby pulls the boiled rabbit sections out of the pot with a pair of tongs she found in the back of a drawer cluttered with graters and cocktail picks and dessert forks and shot glasses. She dumps the pieces on a paper plate, which soaks through. The water

runs over and down the precarious cereal box pile below. She realizes, staring at the coarse-grained brown meat, she's going to need some flour.

The thought of going to the store gives her a headache. Every time she goes she has to dodge people who think they knew her before Carl's accident. They want to ask probing questions about how she's doing lately, how the restoration business is going, if she ever sorted out the problem with Carl's life insurance, if she wants to have dinner with them next week Carl was always such a wonderful cook and it's been what, three years now, but what a horrible ordeal. There was a time, a year ago, when these same people crept around her, whispering to each other about the murderess. She had almost preferred it that way, but as soon as the police no longer accused her of killing her husband, the town seemed to absolve her, too.

She decides to read over the contest rules again, pulling the tattered sheet of paper from the top of a pile in the nearest kitchen drawer. Her eyes scan down the page to the recipe requirements as she leans against the counter.

Recipes must be original and in some way use game meat: frog, bison, bear, snapping turtle, quail, snake, squirrel, rabbit, etc.

Recipes may be for any course: main dish, side dish, beverages, desserts, etc.

All recipes should be legibly hand-written on a 5x7 index card and accompanied by a photograph of the finished recipe result.

A loud crash from the basement jerks Gabby from her reading. Her heart thumps against her breastbone. Probably something heavy fell from the top of a pile. She tries to concentrate again on the contest list.

Judges will determine the winner based on use of game meat, taste, appearance, and originality.

All recipes become property of Gourmet Game, Inc. upon entry, and cannot be returned. Gourmet Game reserves the right to edit, adapt, publish, or otherwise use the recipe in anyway without further compensation.

Postmark deadline in two days. She realizes she'll need to find the camera.

From downstairs, she hears the low screech from a heavy piece of furniture dragging across the floor. Although it's been a long time, she remembers the sound the unfinished concrete in the weight room would make whenever Carl rearranged his equipment. She tiptoes to the basement door. Puts her ear against it. Listens. Now comes a muted thumping. She can feel the door's vibrations under her face. Her cheeks drain for an instant, then the blood comes rushing back, hot with anger and fear. She imagines Carl down there, flinging around piles of her things to make room for his workout space again.

She's just about to start pulling things out of the stairwell so she can go down and investigate when she hears music. Faint, but definite and lilting, a track Gabby hasn't heard in three years. The CD player was buried under two feet of other items the last she knew, and a hundred yards from any outlet. She's always meant to buy a new music player to replace it.

As the volume increases, Gabby wonders if she's going crazy. Carl is gone. She was there when the bar lowered onto his neck, she was there when he went into the ground.

She grabs her purse and heads for the front door.

On her way out, she scribbles on a piece of ochre paper, “Left house for flour” and the date. She’ll put it in the pot marked YOU ARE NOT IMPRISONED, almost half full with her comings and goings over the last year. Just as she opens the door, someone rings the bell.

Flustered, Gabby slams it shut. She peers through the peephole. Stovall stands on the edge of the beat up welcome mat, scratching his head and staring at the grass. Gabby only bothers to cut it when she gets an official letter about proper lawn maintenance. That’s the only time it seems worthwhile to dig the push mower out of the garage. Although, she has always meant to start a flower garden out there.

While he’s gaping at her unruly lawn, Gabby slips through the front door and closes it behind her.

“Stovall, what can I do for you?”

He jumps a little at her sudden appearance.

“Just came by to see how the rabbit was working for you. I was afraid it might have some freezer burn.”

“It’s fine.” Inwardly, Gabby cringes that she left the rabbit sitting out on the counter instead of remembering to put it back in the fridge. “I was just leaving for some flour.”

“With your music on?”

“You hear it too?” The muffled notes float out of the house, at once more threatening and less threatening because they aren’t in her head.

“Of course.” Stovall narrows his eyes, as if trying to see her from a distance instead of two feet.

Gabby turns around and locks the door. "Good."

Stovall clears his throat, paws at the ground with his left black shoe. "Gab, for that rabbit, you should use the deep fryer. That's what Carl always used."

"I don't know where it is." She jangles her keys, swinging them against her bent knuckles.

"He always kept it in that cabinet next to the sink."

Gabby shrugs.

"Well, if you want, jump in my car. You can borrow my fryer, and I'll swing us by the grocery store to pick up some flour."

When they get back to her house, she wants to ask Stovall in, ask if he will help her figure out what's going on in the basement. But she knows he won't understand her piles, won't appreciate their organization: stuffed animals here, furniture here, a mountain of storage tubs there in the guestroom, magazines there on the bed, rows of ceramic pots in the bathroom. She dreads the look of concern, the offer of help, the false cheery tones that will follow afterward whenever he sees her.

She lugs the boxed fryer and oil to the front door, and braces the load against her hip with the crook of her arm to wave goodbye to Stovall.

The house is quiet. She sets down the fryer and shakes the basement doorknob, just to be sure. Evening sets in, and the house darkens. The light Gabby left on in the basement, the

one at the bottom of the stairs she could still reach three months ago, filters out in a thin line under the door crack.

Gabby sits on the floor in front of the door, examines her fingernails in the light.

The rabbit is back in the milk and back in the fridge. She's heated the oil in the fryer and put the flour in a clean-looking bowl, but a small thud made her tense up, her muscles no longer easy to move, even after she found a fallen book in the dining room that could have made the noise. So here she is, cross-legged on the floor, trying to work up the nerve to get to the bottom of all this.

A soft click as the light switches off downstairs. Her hands look blue in the sudden dimness.

Gabby jumps up and turns on the overhead light. She reaches in the drawer of a tiny desk at the front of the pile in front of her and pulls out the basement key. Bracing herself, she twists the key and opens the door, catching as many things as possible as they fall over the threshold and into the hall, cluttering her path.

Like a dog in a mad panic to find a buried bone, she digs things out of the stairwell and tosses them behind her into the hall. Small things she picks up with both hands, as many at a time as possible—dog toys, worn purses, empty binders, a few phone books. Big bulky items—old TV, small child's rocking chair, solid wood guitar case—she carries up with short, fast steps on the stairs. She makes an opening all the way down the stairwell.

When she gets to the bottom, she has an armful of small items that were too lightweight to throw back upstairs. Only a few big pieces are between her and the basement floor. She flicks the light switch on, and peers around the illuminated room, stacked almost to the ceiling with belongings, things she and Carl owned together.

"Hey," says a low, raspy voice. "Turn that light off. I'm trying to sleep here."

Gabby's tongue dries up and sticks to the roof of her mouth.

She runs halfway back up the stairs and squeezes herself against the stairway wall.

"Who are you?" Her voice cracks.

No answer.

"How did you get in my basement?"

Silence. Nothing moves in the packed basement.

Gabby runs back upstairs, jumps over the items she threw earlier and lands on the side of her foot, almost falling over. At the top, she kicks the pile she made out of the way and locks the door behind her.

The path she made is too narrow to allow fast movement, so she high steps over everything to get to her phone in the kitchen. Her fingers punch a nine and a one, and then stop. She looks around her moldy kitchen covered in old cereal boxes, thinks about the piles reaching almost to the ceiling in some areas, the cats she hasn't seen in too long a time, her history with the police. She puts down the phone.

She tries to distract herself, gets the rabbit out of the fridge and makes sure the oil is ready. She'll find the camera and get the competition entry off first thing tomorrow and be out of here in a month.

Somewhere in the house, floorboards creak. In a nearby drawer, she finds a butcher's knife and sets it next to her on the kitchen table. Humming the tune that played earlier, she tries to ignore the sounds, to write them off as noises an old house makes.

She picks a dripping piece of rabbit out of the milk and gets ready to roll it in the flour and drop it in the oil.

"Do you know how to use one of those?"

Gabby lets out a small shriek and jumps so hard her back pops.

A haggard woman stands in the kitchen doorway, pinning a bent bobby pin back into her tangled hair. Her black eyes are surrounded by dark circles, and her pointy yellow teeth remind Gabby of a rat.

Gabby catches her breath, but can still feel her heart pound blood through every vessel. "I have instructions."

"That meat is still wet under the breading. You're going to set the place on fire."

Gabby drops the rabbit chunk back into the milk and picks up the knife. "What do you want?"

"To keep you from burning this place down," says the woman. With a sweep of her arm, she crashes a stack of cereal boxes and cook books off a chair and sits down. "I've gotten comfortable here. I like your basement, and I'm going to stay. Now take that out of the milk and pat it dry."

Gabby reaches for the towel draped over the oven handle.

"With a clean towel." The old woman sighs as she reaches into a drawer and hands over a towel Gabby didn't even know was there. "Now pat it good and dry before you roll it in the flour."

Gabby turns her back to the counter and sets down the knife nearby. There's a click as the basement door locks again. She runs down the hall, knife with blade pointed upward in hand, and yanks on the doorknob. She fishes in her pocket for the key, but it's gone.

"Stay," she hisses. On the way into the bathroom, she hits the door and cracks two of her blessing pots against each other. She sets the knife down to grab a bobby pin, and races out of the room.

Back at the door, she picks the lock, twisting the pin out of shape. Down the steps and into the basement. A breeze blows through the room, and she sees that the small outside window is open. Gabby tears the room apart, shoving aside furniture with loud scraping noises. The woman has made a nest in a pile of old clothes and couch cushions. Gabby kicks at it, and a foul smell rises from the fabric. She gags, but keeps searching behind piles, knocking some with space between them to the ground.

Finding nothing, she enters the weight room. Gently, she moves aside books, broken kitchen appliances, old sets of bedding until she gets to the exercise equipment beneath. She searches every inch of the room, never looking straight at the bench in the corner.

She shuts and locks the basement window, and returns to the bathroom for the knife and a fresh bobby pin to use until she can get the locks changed.

Something new catches her eye.

The doll she'd been working on earlier sits in a cleared spot on the counter, its plastic skin cleaned of grime, a large hole in the dress mended, and its wig untangled, conditioned, and styled. The knife is next to it. Taped to the bathroom mirror, a salt white strip of paper written in a scrawled hand with Gabby's own blue ink pen: YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

CHAPTER 5

IT NEVER SNOWS IN DENVER

A freak snowstorm in Denver shut the airport down. The locals, including Nora's sister, said it doesn't snow there, but when the airport roof caved in from the weight of it, no one was saying that anymore. Flight 191, the Franklins' flight, was the last one in. From the captain's gruff warning that the landing would be turbulent, Nora knew they weren't supposed to land at all, but the other option would be to head back through the oncoming storm. When the wheels hit ground, she felt them skid and slip. The passengers drew a collective breath when the craft veered, and a woman in the back screamed. Nora fingered imaginary controls, a backseat driver in a vehicle where she couldn't see the windshield. She leaned over her husband, big Mike, and patted her son, little Mike, on the knee. His eyes were wide and she could see tears forming, but he sniffed them back. Nora's older son, Jim, sat across the aisle with his head flat against his seat, arms on both his armrest and the one meant for the woman next to him. His eyes were half-closed, and she recognized the bored look he used when things didn't go his way.

The plane came to a stop. People pushed and shoved their way to be the first off. Jim darted into the aisle as soon the crowd opened a slit.

"Jim," Nora said, beckoning him back with one hand.

"Calm down, Mom," he said, and moved forward with the crowd.

Nora stretched to see above the heads in front of her, but Jim was lost in the huddle.

"Don't worry," said big Mike. "He's fine."

One step outside, the wind was strong enough that Nora could barely keep upright. She thought of the light jackets tucked away in their checked bags where they had stowed them that morning. The wind tore at her exposed skin, ripped through her thin shirt as if it wasn't there. She pressed little Mike into her, guided him through the piercing blow as if their feet were tied together. In front, big Mike held her hand. Together they plowed ahead in inches, snow in front of them trampled by the other passengers, more whipping at them from both sides. Nora was thankful they hadn't gone first, hoped Jim inside had a warm drink and dry socks from his carry-on.

When they got to the terminal, their hair full of already melting snow and the protruding parts of their faces numb, a balding man told them he heard the whole five-state area was a blizzard, the cell growing. Others had heard the same and more. All the highways were shut down. I-70 coming and going had been for hours. Even the trains weren't running. The Franklins were the last people in.

They were supposed to be getting away for the week. It had been a hard two years for all of them, and for Jim especially. Nora knew he blamed himself for much of what had happened, and it hurt to see him carry that kind of burden at fifteen. He wandered off for hours, and a few times Nora had been about to call the police when she saw him make his long strides up the driveway. He would never say where he'd been. When he was home, he would hole up in his room with music at full blast, slam the door in anyone's face who tried to visit, including little Mike who stood outside the barred

room biting his lower lip until he was sure it wouldn't reopen. She hadn't seen her two boys exchange more than "Pass the salt" or "I had the remote first" in months. Nora had a hard time knowing how much of it was their family's troubles and how much was Jim being a teenager. Whichever it was, everyone had changed. The trip needed to change them back.

The boys had spring break, and Nora started in on the vacation thing with big Mike again. She'd been trying to get Mike to agree to a vacation ever since they found Marion Wade's body in their ditch. It would be good for their family, she said, to get away from all the sad, all the guilt for a while. At first, he asked how she thought it would look if they took a vacation at such a time, and after the first shock passed, he worked more often than he didn't. The day Nora's sister called to say it was eighty degrees and sunny in Denver, the weather was icy and dreary in Madison, Iowa. Nora booked the plane tickets that afternoon. She told her husband he could come or not, but she and the boys were going to get away and would like to have him along. She wanted to add, but didn't, that she hoped it wasn't too late.

Nora looked for Jim, couldn't see him anywhere. Soon her search turned into fast panic, her eyes darting quicker than her mind could work, her legs sending her to the middle of the terminal at a run, feet pounding in time with heart.

The terminal spun in wide angles around her. A small boy threw a bouncy ball against the gray brick next to the empty shoeshine stand. Businessmen paced next to the payphone in ties and suits with wet ankles. One man with a cowboy hat and a wind burned face sang under his breath from a chair nearby. Everywhere Nora looked, people. But no Jim.

Nora, desperate, stopped a woman on her way into the restroom with four children in tow. "Please," Nora said, "my son." The woman's dress was faded and some kind of stain had become part of the fabric on one shoulder. When she looked at Nora her eyes were flat, exhausted.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I've got enough to keep an eye on." She pushed past Nora and herded her children forward. As she did, Nora spotted him in line at a coffee stand.

"Jim," she said, coming up to him. "I thought we'd lost you." The Mikes followed behind, slow, big Mike telling little Mike to blow on his hands to warm them.

"Don't be so dramatic, Mom," Jim said. "Where am I going to go?" His words, true and innocent enough, oozed with a disdain he reserved for her and no one else. He might as well have called her an idiot for the way it made her feel.

"You're right," she said. "I'm sorry. I think we're all just shook up."

Jim grabbed his coffee from the tired-looking employee. "It's no big deal, Mom," he said. "We're here, aren't we?"

She nodded. Big Mike gave Jim a warning glance, but Nora took her husband's hand to stop him saying anything.

"This is the only place open anywhere in the terminal," Jim said into his coffee cup. "Get in line if you want a drink." He walked away and sat down.

"It'd need to be stronger than coffee," said big Mike.

Nora pretended not to hear him.

It was clear they were stuck for the night. No one had to say it. The other terminals had been shut down long before, and most of the airport employees had made it out before the worst hit.

The coffee shop was the one source of light along the aisle, the other shops dark with the grates down and security lights flashing. Food seemed to be everyone's first reaction, and for hours the line remained so long, wrapped back and forth around the terminal, it was hard to find the end. People lingered in front of the largest gift shop, eyed the shiny snack packages. A couple stood in front and pressed their noses through the grate.

Nora tried to reach her sister. She walked past the businessmen, still lurking by the payphone. None of them spoke to her as she put her coins and dialed the number. As she thought, no luck. The line was dead, knocked out by the storm. When she walked away from the phone, a few businessmen stepped in to fill the place she'd just left empty.

She and the Mikes joined people looking for a place to turn in for an early night. They used their bags as pillows. Jim was off somewhere else and although Nora worried about him, she stayed out of his space. She figured he would be up all night, like many planned, to be the first for continuing flights or outgoing rental cars in the morning.

Sometime in the night, a fight broke out. Nora raised her head, swallowed against the terrible taste in her mouth, and tried to figure out where the noise came from. All the lights were off for the night except a few emergency ghost lights here and there. Soon, a husky employee with a flashlight stood over two men thirty feet from her, and pushed them apart. She could make out the grievances. One, the balding man from when they'd first arrived, claimed the other had groped his wife in the night, promised to break the bastard's jaw if he came near either of them again. Nora drew closer to big Mike, who would sleep through an F5 tornado, and looked over to make sure little Mike was still okay. As the ruckus settled and she put her head back down, she saw Jim near the two

men, head against a column, and he looked like he was laughing. When he caught her eye, though, his look turned stony, distant. She shook her head and closed her eyes.

The announcer coming over the intercom had bad news: they would have to remain in the airport until further notice. No one had yet heard how long the storm was expected to last. Overnight, the snow had piled higher, blowing and drifting, blocking some of the windows even at terminal level, and the reports were that it hadn't let up yet.

A large group of travelers rushed the terminal exit. The few employees left stepped forward to stop them.

"Please," Nora heard one say, "stay in the terminal. The roof has caved in spots—" She didn't hear the rest. Someone tossed the employee aside and led the crowd out. Nora ran downstairs with the group, part of its singular motion, toward baggage claim and check-in, taking the stalled escalator two steps at a time. The snow had fallen so hard and so fast that the front doors by baggage claim and check-in, the automatic kind that swish apart, wouldn't even be pried open when one couple and then more people tried. Wet packed snow pressed against the glass, darkened the room and blocked a good view of outside. No way vehicles could get down the streets. The top of a car antenna poked out of a drift. Around her, people pounded on the windows and doors as if that might help them outside, and as if, once outside, there would be anywhere they could go.

When the crowd tried to go back upstairs, defeated, to share the news, a woman employee tried to stop them.

"Let's proceed in an orderly fashion," she said. "Make a single line, please." She smiled and held her hand behind backs as people filed back up the escalator. She held her own against the pushing crowd until one of the businessmen swung his briefcase

against her head. It knocked her down. The crowd stampeded forward again, right over her. Thoughtless, like the Franklins' cows herded into a different area of the pasture.

Nora hung back. She watched, mouth open. She tried to see through the moving legs, but she couldn't catch sight of the woman. When the others passed, she saw her, her body at an unnatural angle across the steps. She moved a little and groaned, grasped her head, lied back down.

Nora rushed forward, knowing she was the only one left, the only one to help. But as she saw the bruised face, lip split and bleeding, she braked hard. Suddenly she was looking at Marion Wade. Although she hadn't seen Marion before the fire, Nora knew then it would be her image of her forever on: beaten and bruised, pushed down by a blunt force she couldn't control, unconscious and helpless to whatever fate might deliver next. At least, Nora chose to believe unconscious. Anything else was unbearable. But the woman employee lifted herself again, tried to come to, and Nora's throat constricted as she imagined Marion doing the same two years earlier.

Nora couldn't stay with the woman. Nora couldn't leave her behind. She stayed there frozen, half bent-over, until big Mike came down with a male employee. "There she is," Big Mike said, and pointed at Nora. The employee nodded and set down a medical kit, white plastic with a large red cross. Big Mike put his arm around Nora and took her upstairs.

It wasn't long after that they lost power. Backup generators kept a few lights on, and people became moths, swarming around them. The windows let in a murky gray light that was worse to sit in than the dark. The coffee shop couldn't make anything new and ran out of the prepackaged stuff within an hour. Children and teenagers and some

adults pressed their faces to the grates between them and the supplies inside the other shops, but the employees refused to open them.

Jim got hungry. His appetite ebbed and flowed so that one night he'd reject dinner and the next he'd eat his own portion and everyone else's who didn't keep a close eye on their plate. He stalked the closed grates, gave them an experimental shove now and then. The employees, exhaustion dripping from their faces as tangible as sweat, gave him wary glances. A group of people formed each time he walked by the grates, as if that would be the time he broke in, and they wanted to be right behind him.

Babies cried forever. Nora's head felt tight under their relentless shrieks. Her own stomach reminded her of the hours it had been since she'd eaten. She never had been able to get anything down before boarding a plane.

Time went by and no one in charge offered a food solution. The pilot and crew from the Franklins' flight had changed into sweaters and sat waiting with everyone else. The handful of employees left to be in charge—a couple shop workers, a few janitors, the wounded security woman, and one lone overweight guard—weren't hard to keep track of in their airport uniforms, and one or two would go off somewhere every now and then, come back, and another few would go off. Nora suspected they had stash of snacks in a break room somewhere. She eyed the closed shops, too, and realized she didn't care if Jim did force his way in. The food was no use to anyone outside the airport. Their money was no good either. Outside, above the white-coated parts of the panes, snow still swirled around, as if the flakes were choosy about where to land because they knew they'd be there a long time.

The second night, a crash woke everyone.

Nora and the Mikes, like everyone else, slept as close to the emergency lights as possible, and couldn't see into the shadows. With not even a smatter of light coming in the windows, everywhere out of the dim sodium glow of the emergency lights was black. The security guard's light flew to the large snack shop Jim had been stalking. One side of the gate crushed where it met the wall. Candy bars scattered all over the floor. No sign of a perpetrator. Alarms went off, but the only people who could do anything were already there. The noise made the pressure in Nora's head worse.

The security guard was outraged, face red and neck cords bulging. As one, the crowd crawled out of their sleeping spots and into the dark shop. Nora and the Mikes too. Someone tackled the guard and it was a free-for-all. People scooped food in their arms only to trip and drop it all on those scrounging on the floor under them, a bunch of children around a broken piñata. Nora scooped what she could into her bag, took it back to where she'd been sleeping, and put her head on top of it. There was no question who had broken in. Smacking and wet grunting came from all sides as people settled back down. She saw the tired mother and her four children tear into candy bars, the foil wrapping barely off. Nora tried not to think of cockroaches munching on cardboard as the Mikes came back over.

"What did you two get?" She whispered. The air was thick and eyes darted everywhere. She tried not to attract attention.

Little Mike's hands were full and he dumped packages on the floor in front of her.

"And you?" she asked her husband.

He opened his empty hands.

"Nothing?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Was trying to keep this one from getting trampled." He helped little Mike pick up his loot.

"We'll make do," Nora said, but she couldn't help but blame big Mike, and that tiny ounce of blame made it easy for her to put all their trouble on him. If he'd burned the ditches when he was supposed to, she thought, putting her head back down, everything would still be the same and they wouldn't be stealing junk food for their lives in a Colorado airport.

Big Mike kept promising to burn their ditches in the autumn, but the end of every day found him drinking a beer on the couch without it done. "Who knows what the neighbors think of us," she told him. "The Wades burned theirs last month."

"It's too dry now," he said back. "Dangerous." He opened another beer and flipped to a new channel.

So in early May, after the ground was no longer saturated with snow melt, and the ditch weeds popped up taller than big Mike's head, Nora went to her boys watching TV in the living room.

"Our ditch is embarrassing," she said. "I'll give you ten dollars each to burn it today, like should've been done last fall."

They ran down with a shovel and a sprayer full of diesel.

After everyone in the terminal was back asleep, something hard poked Nora's side. She sat up and swatted, afraid someone was groping around. Her hand closed around a slick plastic wrapper and she saw Jim standing over her. He let the candy bar go in her grasp then ran back into the shadows.

The next morning, while Nora and the Mikes ate their chocolate breakfast, Jim walked across the terminal in short quick steps. Nora waved. He glanced their way, but didn't stop.

"Jim, why don't you have breakfast with us?" Nora had to call over the other diners reaching sugar highs. The windburned cowboy was singing again, fueled by junk food and the raised spirits of those around him.

Jim called back without breaking stride. "Nah, I'm good."

"He doesn't like us anymore," little Mike said. "He told me so."

Big Mike didn't look at Jim. "He didn't mean that," he told little Mike, handing over part of his candy bar.

"I think he did," said little Mike. In a small voice, "I don't really blame him, though." He looked around before he took another tiny bite.

"It smelled funny," little Mike had said that day almost two Mays ago, flopping back on the couch.

"It's diesel, Honey," Nora said. "It smells like that."

Mike shook his head. "No, funny like that time Dad exploded the shop heater and burned off his eyebrow hair."

"I tried to tell him it was probably just some dead animal down there," Jim said. "But he won't stop talking about it."

Nora tried to let it go, tried to sit and do the week's dinner planning, but little Mike's words wouldn't sit with her. He'd lived on the farm all his life. He knew what a ditch burning should smell like. And it wasn't like him to talk about any one thing for longer than five minutes. He talked about the smell all afternoon.

"It might have been a pig," he said, coming up to her at the kitchen table. "Or a mountain lion. Only something big would smell like that."

"Mountain lions don't live in Iowa," she said, although she knew better. She patted his back, tried to concentrate on the paper in front of her but the familiar words swam into something unreadable. "Go play," she said finally, and he ran off.

Nora looked at little Mike sitting against a trashcan on the airport floor, eyes unfocused on the candy in his hands. He was no longer the boy who pulled whole strands of pasta from his nose, who did a perfect mimic of anyone he knew, who hid behind doors and under furniture waiting to scare an unsuspecting family member. Now he was the scared one, his nightmares kept him from sleeping in his own bed. She missed the funny boy. She picked at the perforations in her wrapper. She would get him back. She would get them all back.

Nora shoved the rest of her candy bar in her mouth and went to find Jim.

Acting like she needed to use the restroom, she made sure none of the employees were looking and darted for the doors to the next terminal.

It was colder there, and spooky. Spooky like a community pool during off season, drained and dark and silent. Empty hall, shadowy gates, shut up shops. She wrapped her arms around her torso and listened hard, but all she heard was her own blood whooshing through her ears. She kept walking. She needed to find her son.

No sign of him anywhere. At the end of the terminal hall, the caved in roof. A sign above Nora said Terminal C. Its arrow pointed toward a wall of snow. The drift spilled through the roof opening, piled thick from the floor up.

At the top of the large windows, Nora could see flakes still falling, whirling.

She went over and stood on a seat, balanced on the armrest for an extra inch of height. From there, she could just see over the snow-packed panes. The only discernible things outside were the white snow sky and the slightly whiter flakes against it. Where there had been at least bumps under the snow for cars and signs, there was nothing now, everything was so well-buried. It scared her, all that white, and she started to step down but stopped. Below, next to an almost-hidden jetway, she was sure she'd seen something brown blowing in the wind. She pressed her face to the cold glass, her breath fog made it hard to see. But there it was again. A tuft of brown. She moved to the next window and stood on high tiptoes. If it was Jim, she would follow him out, but she wasn't quitting without knowing. She didn't want to run into some animal scavenging for food.

A flash of red next to the brown and she recognized Jim's shirt collar. She jumped off the seat and turned a slow circle, staring at gate doors, as if doing so would tell her which was unlocked. No choice but to try them. She jiggled the handle nearest to her. Locked. She tried its double on the other side of the service counter. Locked. The doors on the opposite side of the aisle, also locked. She looked around for another door, one personnel in bright clothing might use to get down to the landing pad, but didn't see one.

A wall separated her from the next gate area. She rounded the corner and headed to a door. Each footstep smacked the carpet as she gathered her strength, felt currents run through her right arm. The door would open. She would make it open. Her hand shot out, grabbed the handle, and jerked. The bolt stopped the door and her muscles rang as her own force wrenched her back, still gripping the handle.

She wiped her hands on her pants, stared at the snowdrift. In contrast to the dark terminal, it almost glowed. She'd been around enough drifts. In Des Moines, trucks clearing parking lots in the shopping center sometimes pushed the excess into batteries higher than the mall itself. She knew the sinking, how one leg in a small pile could disappear up to the thigh, almost impossible to pull out.

She made a final scan of the terminal. There was no other way. She put her feet in the base of the snow mountain. Her shoes had finally dried only hours before. Within seconds they were wet again. She could feel the bones in her feet creak with cold as she climbed up, up, legs pumping. Whiter and whiter, brighter and brighter until a wind more snow than air blew her hair straight up. The wind wailed and whistled, and a sharp pain jabbed her as it blew in and out of her ears. She hurried forward until the roof stopped sagging under her, then slowed her step. She expected a drop to the ground, but when she got to what she knew must be the roof edge, the snow sloped down like a slide. The wind blew more against the slope all the time, individual flakes catching in the space between roof and ground.

And there below was Jim, a good ways from her, although exact distances were hard to judge in a landscape so endlessly white. He had a bucket the same color as the snow and shoveled in front of him in furious rapid movements. A clear path went out a few feet from where he stood. The tracks he'd made were light, perforations in the blank paper landscape.

"Jim." She called to him as the wind ripped her breath from her mouth and she thought there was no way her voice would carry against it. But he turned his head, looked up at her.

"Mom." She could tell he was shouting but what reached her was faint, words she might not have been able to make out if it hadn't been her son speaking them. "What the hell are you doing out here?"

"I could ask you the same thing." She yelled, hoping he would understand. "Come back inside."

He paused, and she thought he hadn't heard. She took a breath to say it louder, but he shook his head.

"I have to get out," he said. "I can't take it in there with all you anymore."

"How far can you get with that bucket?" she asked.

He gave her the bored half-closed eye look she knew so well. She would never get him back that way. Careful of her steps, she made her way down the slope. At the bottom, she stood in a path he'd made. She ignored the pain in her feet as the snow leaked through her socks, pain so cold it felt like burning.

She wanted to reach out to him, but stayed at a distance.

"Jim," she said again.

"What, Mom? I'm a little busy." A bucket of snow landed to the side, some icy powder escaped and landed on her neck. Nora shivered.

"We came here to get away," she said, "and it's only given us time to think about the things we were getting away from."

"No shit," he said and scooped another bucket over his head.

These mutterings of his never bothered her the way they did the Mikes. They brought little Mike to tears and big Mike to a temper.

"I just don't want it to change us," she said.

Jim stopped mid-throw. "You think you haven't changed?"

She hesitated, stuck her hands in her armpits to bring feeling back to her frozen fingertips. Picked a foot off the ground. Asked, "What do you mean?"

He laughed, one blunt, guttural ha, and slung the snow.

What he said surprised her. She'd worked hard to banish Russell Wade's face from her mind the day he came looking for his wife. Every day she tried not to look down into the valley at his farm and almost every day she managed to stop herself thinking of him and his son trying to get by without Marion. She pretended not to notice Jim standing at the hillcrest some evenings, chewing on his lip as he looked over the Wade's land, his face expressionless, his arms crossed in front. She did what she could to make things like they were before Russell Wade showed up that day.

When she saw Russell coming, she'd rolled her eyes. He came to the house often, always complaining about a new piece of garbage little Mike and Jim had shot into his field with their potato launcher. But since they were the wrong ones, she always screwed on a smile before she opened the door. And so she did that day.

"Have the boys been launching trash in your field again, Russell? I'm sorry, I'll talk to them."

"I'm actually wondering if you've seen my wife. She went for a walk around two this afternoon and I haven't seen her since."

Although no older than Nora, Marion had a weak heart and the doctor said daily walks would help. Nora saw Marion walking every day when she drove the boys to or from town. Marion would wave. Nora would wave.

"That's a pretty long walk," Nora said.

Her kitchen clock that made duck calls on the hour said the time was approaching six.

"That's what I thought," he said. "I drove up and down the road."

"Well, I'll let you know if I see her," said Nora.

Russell nodded, drove away.

Later, the doctor said Marion probably died of internal injuries, the kind sustained by collision with a car going in excess of sixty miles per hour. She probably, the doctor said, was gone before the fire. The probably was what Nora had trouble living with. The probably was why she couldn't shake the screaming in her dreams.

Watching Jim, she had a feeling hers weren't the only dreams that screamed. He was shoveling against more than snow. She walked close enough to touch his shoulder, then left him to his work.

Back inside, little Mike had chocolate on his face neither he nor big Mike had bothered to remove. Nora wanted to wipe it off, but she let it stay. All around people murmured, gave themselves small tasks to keep their minds off the situation out of their control.

The balding man's wife flipped a magazine too fast to be reading. The windburned cowboy sang and in between songs he smoked his cigarette to the filter. The tired mother's little girl tied her shoes together, then untied them. Tied them again. A young man paced, never too far from his sleeping wife, her stomach round and tight. Outside, Jim worked against the piling snow. The Mikes played slaps, their hands red from hitting each other. Nora leaned against the trashcan, closed her eyes, and wished there was something for her.

CHAPTER 6

BLUE WOMAN

If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive. — Audre Lorde

It was either too early or too dry for morels. Heather felt a low stabbing in her back from the bent over search to spot the cylindrical mushroom, its texture like a wasp's nest. The light, fading from canary into mustard, filtered down in spots and spatters onto the forest floor from between the trees.

She straightened and stretched her chin to the overhanging treetops, both hands on her lower back. She'd spent half her childhood in the woods, but she hadn't been in these trees behind her new apartment yet. In searching, searching for something that wasn't there, she felt like Gretel and her berries.

She found herself at the end of an old trail. As she worked her way through a wall of trees, she heard cars speed by on the nearby four-lane in and out of town, a faint mechanic voice from the burger joint's order box, and the continuous buzz of a lawnmower at someone's house or the retirement center. Even with town all around them, the woods were still overgrown and wild, a tract left behind when town consumed someone's farmland and a contractor didn't feel like pulling up tree stumps. A branch slapped Heather in the face and she broke it off in retaliation. Old dead leaves, trapped under wet and heavy snowfall and drying in the spring air, shuffled beneath her feet.

There had been attempts to regulate the woods, to close the area off at sundown, charge entry fees, forbid taking plants and insects and rocks out, but they were ignored. It's difficult to treat a forest as an enclosed space, and everyone in Madison took advantage of its thousand openings between trees. Gardeners toted large rocks in wheelbarrows to their cars or nearby houses. Couples slipped between trees at midnight, and children came out during summer evenings with mason jars full of fireflies and snails. While Heather's own grandmother would have warned about the hissing glow of St. Elmo's Fire, wolves, and sometimes Big Foot to keep her out of a forest at night, the other day running through the adjacent park she'd heard an elderly woman warn a child instead, pointing to the thicket, about druggies and perverts and the active hobo camp.

Off to her right, the woods looked lighter. She pushed branches out of her way and stepped over fallen logs. She stumbled out from a final row of trees into a clearing full of damp yellow grass.

A rundown shack at the far end gaped at the clearing in front and the continuing woods behind, its boards like lost molars where they'd been beaten out and broken into splintered halves by years of drunk teenagers, severe thunderstorms, the pressure of leaning snow piles, and drifters making fire.

The sad structure was not unlike the shack her parents had torn down to build their business. Her mother's nursery had, for years, been the only place to get decent plants in the tri-county area, including the city. Heather watched it go up one summer, the raw scratchy boards set into place while she played with an empty five gallon bucket, making it a spaceship painted bright red to confuse the angry inhabitants of the planet Colznoa, a magical well with leprechaun treasure at the distant bottom, a drum.

Until her mother needed the bucket and she, always compliant, gave it up.

The shop was small but cozy with its fire in the winter and fans blowing water in the summer. The attached greenhouse stretched on and when Heather was little, she wandered it every day. It morphed and stretched in her imagination, was each time a different place she'd never been. It didn't matter that her family never took vacations and couldn't, having sunk their money into the nursery. She traveled in the greenhouse. But one day she recognized the paths she took. She knew the layout, the rows, the plants. Knew that if she turned right from the roses, she would find the little bench with clumps of mint and parsley and other herbs, that if she walked straight from front to back she would come to the biggest cactus she had ever seen, sitting in its sunny spot.

After the greenhouse lost its mystery, she stopped going in. It was hot and muggy and filled with gnats. Her parents still worked there every day, and she would visit the air-conditioned shop, but she hadn't been inside the greenhouse building in over a decade.

She had just moved from her too-small room in her parents' house to Maurice's apartment, had given up her mother and her grandmother's approval to do so. The praise they used to lavish on her so thick it felt like a comfortable blanket had thinned. Whenever they spoke those days, someone else was the good decision maker, the girl with common sense, the one who was going far. When the conversation turned to Heather as she carried a cast iron pot or threaded a needle for one of them, they'd talk about used to be. Anything anyone wanted, they said, had been okay with Heather, and she just did everything right. They always used past tense.

The apartment was very much Maurice's home.

She never felt it more than when he was away playing kickball and color tag with his elementary phys. ed. students. She didn't like his job, always felt if he tried harder he could do more than play games all day. When he was working, his belongings crowded the space, reminded her how new she was there, how little say she had. Dirty athletic shorts piled up on the bedroom floor, made it hard to walk through.

"Maurice," she'd said the first week, picking up the clothes. "Are these dirty?"

When Maurice smiled, it reached the top of his gums. He ran a hand through his mop of dark hair, his face pink. He took the clothes from her and sniffed a shirt, a pair of shorts. "They're sorted by how dirty they are," he said and kept sniffing, dropped them back into overlapping piles on the floor. Heather didn't know how he could tell where one wad of clothing stopped and another began. She left him to his sniff test.

Balance balls in three different sizes rolled from the living room into the kitchen and back. No matter how she tried to keep them still, she would look up from doing dishes or reading the newspaper and one would have rolled out again, taunting her from the middle of the floor.

She could eat the food, use the electricity, washer and dryer, TV, the collection of drawers that had been cleared for her, but no one coming in would know she lived there. Her red beanbag chair where she'd always read, her winter clothes, and her collection of unusual seeds collected over birthdays and Christmases were still in boxes in the garage three stories down and across the parking lot.

She had pushed the food in the cabinets aside, dug deep on the wood shelves for something to eat. She pulled everything out: oatmeal, cayenne pepper, beef jerky, and six or seven jars of vitamins. She stared at the empty shelves, then shoved it all back in

place. She opened the windows. The spring air was cool, damp. The smell of wet dirt and spongy things growing. She would find her own lunch. She left the windows open and went to the woods.

With the shack in front of her, she tried to imagine the apartment and her mother's greenhouse in similar disrepair. The setting sun illuminating wide holes and sneaking into crevices between piles of litter inside. Any decay scene that came to mind she recognized from a movie, and she wondered if that kind of slow, noticeable decomposition would be allowed to the places she knew, or if the buildings of her existence would be bulldozed down one day, nice and easy, to make room for something else.

Pop cans lined the shack's inside, set up in pyramids and lines for target practice, riddled with bullet holes, some so much they were more hole than aluminum. The dirt floor was dotted white with cigarette butts and had several deep slanted holes that looked big enough for rat burrows.

Heather's foot hovered mid-step. Someone was in back corner. His arms hugged his knees, his chin rested on his right arm in sleep. Underneath, in the dark V of his legs, a bag of loose change, mostly pennies, was pushed against his jeans, his hunched form protecting the coins like a dragon guarding a hoard.

She knew who he was. Joshua Wade. Maurice called him his best friend, although she didn't understand a friendship where the two people never spoke. Maurice talked about him and the things they did as kids: baseball, bike rides, toad catches in the creek at the farm Joshua's parents had owned.

She'd only seen Joshua a few times.

Usually sitting by himself in the back of some town bar. Something about his aloofness made her uncomfortable, and she never wanted to be in the same room with him. But now sleeping in the corner of this shack with the slits of his blue irises showing, Heather felt compelled to stay, although she had a peach pit feeling in her gut that she should leave. A heavy calm settled around her, the kind that sometimes comes before a critical shift, and she waited to see what was going to happen. No bird chirped, all distant town noises stopped, the wind stilled. She backed up to the doorframe, blocked the sunlight that made Joshua's ears almost translucent embers. When her shadow covered his face, his eyes flipped open.

She wagged her hand, an awkward sideways, elbow-to-hip wave.

"Blue woman," he said, focusing on her, but also somewhere behind her. Sleep thickened his voice like cornstarch. He pulled himself straighter so his back was flat against the wall behind him. Coins clinked together as he straightened his legs over the bag without noticing.

"Hi Joshua," she said. "I'm just leaving." But she made no move to step out. She hovered on the entryway. He wasn't something she didn't understand about her boyfriend, and maybe if she understood Joshua, she could understand other things too.

"Blue woman," Joshua said again.

Heather squinted at him. "Who?"

Joshua looked around, searching for something, then pulled the bag of coins from under him. The filtered light caught some of the shinier pennies and they flashed by as he moved the bag to his side. He didn't answer her, just made divots in the change through the plastic.

"You are the blue woman." He looked half-asleep. "She lives most of the time a life as normal as anyone else. But, at certain times, she ventures into the woods in hopes of snaring a hunter or some other unfortunate man wandering through the trees. At first, the man will not know it's her, and will consider himself lucky for the company of a beautiful woman. Then, under the cover of nightfall, she paints herself blue with cornflower petals and alum and he knows who she is, but by then it's too late. The blue woman can either help or harm the ensnared man. It all depends on his answer to her riddle. If he answers correctly—but no man ever has—she can grant him any wish. If he doesn't, she swallows him whole, spits him back out, and leaves him a desiccated shell of what he once was. And for her mistreatment, he will pine for her until the day he dies." He smiled. "But I'm not worried. You didn't come for me. You came for him."

Heather didn't ask who. She'd met Maurice outside her mother's nursery, a place not so different from the woods. He's been looking at walnut trees. The school had wanted to plant a row to give the kids more privacy at recess.

Her stomach twisted tighter around the peach pit, but she didn't want to leave. She had to see where it was going. And as crazy as it was, an image of herself was forming, and she liked it. Cobalt skin. Cornskilk hair, coarse and fine. Eyes like green marbles. Mysterious, malevolent, things she had never been before. She breathed deep. The air was smoky, almost gummy. It stuck to her windpipe and lungs as she inhaled. She held her breath a while before she spoke.

Madison was full of stories about its own peripheries, legends passed quietly from person to person, things believed but not spoken of. The haunted tracks where ghost children pushed cars across.

The floating girl who lived in the clouds and protected Madison from tornadoes. Joshua's story wasn't familiar.

"I've never heard that story," Heather said.

"I know." Joshua smiled. "It's sometimes hard to recognize your own story when you hear it."

"I'm pretty sure you made it up." She waited for him to say something, anything that might convince her.

He smiled again. "That doesn't mean it's not true."

"Well, I don't grow cornflowers or own any alum. And I came out for morels, not a hunter." She tried to say it as if she were disinterested. She flipped her hand, jutted out a hip, lowered one corner of her lip in a half frown, but the whole time she took shallow breaths, waiting for his next response.

Joshua frowned. "Maybe I was mistaken."

He left then, stood up with a jolt and strode out of the shack, swinging the coin bag in front of him. His elbow brushed against the sleeve of her blouse as he left.

She sucked in air. Looked at the spot where he had sat. Pictured herself standing there, saw her disparate parts: limp dishwater hair, deep under-eye circles, shoulder and neck skin reddening into sunburn.

Back along the path and through one of the woods' thousand exits, she ran to the apartment complex. Neighbors with leashed Yorkies and hightop running shoes waved. She ignored them. Kept running. She saw Maurice's car was still gone. He wasn't home yet, but he would be soon.

The apartment door slammed behind her.

In a junk drawer in the white tile kitchen, Heather found a tin of acrylic paint and a wide frayed brush. In the bathroom, she slipped off her shirt and jeans and sneakers and stood in her underwear with arms outstretched. She started at her wrist and drew a blue streak up to her elbow. The paint was cold and glassy wet, flaky as it dried. Blue as concentrated cornflowers. She painted one arm, then the other. One leg, then the other. She washed her face in blue so steady a cobalt glow sat in the bottom of her vision. She tasted the art room flavor on her lips. In the morning, she knew she would be broken out everywhere, knew she was allergic to acrylic paint from an unfortunate makeup job in a middle school play, but she painted on in deliberate, steady strokes, across her upper chest and clavicle, down her stomach, around her hips, up her neck. She drew the brush over her hands and feet. Felt the light touch of the brush as she slipped it into the spaces between her fingers. Her toes.

She turned in front of her full-length mirror. Admired how well she had covered herself.

Out the window, she saw Maurice's car swerve into his parking spot by the complex door. She took one more look, then hurried over half unpacked boxes and wadded brown paper to the bathroom.

In the shower, she watched the blue water collect around her pink toenails before it went down the drain. The front door creaked through the wall. She heard Maurice call for her, scrubbed harder to get the blue off before he saw.

The bathroom door opened and closed. “How was your day?” he asked. Running water muffled the usual rasp in his voice.

She took a deep breath, considered her answer as she scrubbed at her fingernails.

"I heard a riddle," she said. She peered at him through the small space between curtain and wall, looked at him without being seen.

"Oh yeah?" He sat on the counter, facing the shower. He played with a package of dental floss near the sink. Heather fingered the opaque shower curtain, glad she had insisted on it when she moved in.

"Let's hear the riddle," he said.

She recited one she remembered from elementary school, something about the more you take, the more you leave behind.

He got it wrong. She knew he would.

"Too bad," she said.

He left for the kitchen. When she saw his back turned, his dark poofy hair heading out of sight, she yanked the shower curtain open. She saw her reflection in the bathroom mirror, her face and neck still covered in blue. She turned in Maurice's direction. He disappeared into the kitchen, never looked back.

"Too bad," she repeated to her reflection, watched the blue monster's lips move as hers did. She grinned, her gums bright red, her teeth white and sharp, her eyes a vibrant animal shade against all that blue.

She rubbed at a bit of paint stuck to the hair by her right ear. It swirled down the drain, and she thought about how the plumbing would be blue for a long time to come.

CHAPTER 7

SEVERANCE

A raw, stringy stump where his hand used to be. Only air where his fingers, long and loose like his left hand, should hang. His knuckles. The hair they grew. The moons of his fingernails. Gone.

Mike rewrapped his bandages with extreme care. Two weeks after the amputation, he was already practiced at dressing his arm. He sat on the toilet lid in the dim bathroom. Pinky held the bandages in place while pointer, middle, and thumb wound the gauze around.

Sarah offered no help, but sat fully-dressed on the edge of the tub, facing him. A hard lump of air stretched its way from deep in her stomach through her throat and mouth and ended in her nose. Breathing made difficult. She glared at the empty air surrounding his right wrist.

He caught her eye in the mirror and paused mid-wrap. "What's your deal?"

She looked down and focused on her own right hand. Picked at a hangnail. Let it hang on for now. Her voice was even and quiet. "You know damn well my deal."

He ripped the gauze tape with his teeth and tacked the bandage in place. "You think I wanted this?" He waved the bandage back and forth straight in the air, a belated surrender flag. "I told you. I had to give it to Cate. I agreed a long time ago, before I met you."

Her eyes followed him as he moved to the sink. "Then, yes, you wanted it. You agreed, and at some point, you wanted it. And don't say her ugly name." She put the hangnail between her teeth. Bit down. Tore it away with a shake of her head. Pain, hot and hard, lit up the side of her nail bed.

He moved his arms up and brought them down fast, as if to slam his hands on the counter for effect.

Just before they hit the fake marble, he stopped. His arms fell, drooped at his sides. "It was our goddamn agreement. We sealed it in blood."

The bathroom door slammed behind him. For a moment she sat and felt the hard lump of air tighten her throat and nasal passages. The back of her head felt dizzy and light as she stood up and moved to the toilet. Bent down. Pushed her hair behind her ears. With a light whoosh of air, she blew the dirty bandages off the seat where he'd left them and into the neighboring trashcan.

One day that seemed like a lifetime ago, she and Mike came home to find a pale yellow note on the door. Cate had found a surgeon. In a blue crayon, Cate wrote just his name and number, then tacked the note there.

"The guy's probably a cutter," Sarah said, ripping the pale yellow note from the door. "Hack anybody up for any reason. Who else would—" She couldn't find the breath or words to say anything else.

"Cate's probably sleeping with him," Mike muttered, and pushed on into the house. His voice was rough, like the stubble around the tip of his chin.

She bit her tongue.

Mike threw note the away without calling.

She felt a pebble of hope rise somewhere inside.

But after weeks of angry phone conversations, loud fights, and hushed conversations, the pebble wore down until the last shaving of it vanished in the hospital waiting room. He was going to give a piece of himself to Cate. She pointed that out to him. He said nothing. They'd had the same discussion every day since the day of the crayon note.

Mike flipped through whatever magazine was nearby. She had noticed him using his hands in any way possible that week. He made pretzels from scratch, folding the dough and pinching it together; rubbed at the dirt in the tile grout with each finger; took on extra jobs, leaving early in the morning carrying as many supplies in his hands as he had in his case. His fingers drummed against her in his sleep.

They took him to surgery and she sat, numb, for hours, never lifting a finger. The only movement was her heart riding a slow elevator into the place between her back molars.

Afterward, while Mike was passed out in his hospital bed, she went for a cup of coffee. She listened to her tennis shoes slap against the shining tiles. Near the gift shop, she paused in front of a display of candy bouquets. One on the bottom right was all mint chocolate, Mike's favorite. She stooped to examine it. When she stood up, so fast it made her dizzy, she caught a glance of Cate carrying a white box the size of a baseball mitt out of the building. Cate's pearl and crystal headband sparkled under the fluorescent lights.

Her feet crunch the gravel. As she walks, she sends a small scattering of rocks ahead of her, as if testing that the next bit of dark road will be there when she steps

forward. Her right hand clutches a flashlight, but she doesn't point it ahead. Instead she swings it at her side. Light bounces off the gravel and jumps into spaces between rocks. Where field meets gravel, she can hear corn leaves rustle against the midnight breeze.

The backcountry road is new to her, but she's traveled it dozens of times on a worn out map of the county, the route traced with a nubby red coloring pencil grabbed from a large tub of craft supplies. During their affair, when it was still an affair, Mike never brought her to the house and bed he shared with Cate. Now she tries to imagine the house, its decor. A three-story with yellow trim, Mike had said that once. A chandelier, crystal like Cate's favorite headband, casting soft rosy light over the dining room table. Fluffy rugs maybe, the kind chair legs disappear in. Expensive but so dense crumbs get stuck in the fibers. A whole collection of precious porcelain figurines, their pale, too-fat miniature fingers intertwined in reenactments of human relationship. Mike's hand, Cate's prize and not hers, would be displayed on the wall. A conversation piece. A reminder that Cate had him first.

Shoulders hunch like a mound left by a burrowing gopher. Body shivers against the warm night. Nose buries deep in the collar of the sweatshirt. She breathes deep. Damp wallpaper adhesive, sour milk undertones. A shirt Mike forgot to move from the washer to the dryer. His shirt, size XL, turns her bony frame chunky. Larger than herself, she feels intimidating. She rubs a ragged spot on her thumbnail against her other fingers. She will get what was his, what is hers, what should be theirs.

The hand that gave her his number. That ran through her hair when he thought she was asleep. Fumbled into hers that first day at the lake.

The hottest summer day in their landlocked state.

Mercury over one hundred degrees. Head high corn growing in the dried brown dirt. Hard to picture the soil dark and moist beneath its weathered crust. Air like a thick wet comforter. To the left a few hundred feet, the lake road was visible, a straight line as far as eye would go. Heat made waves in the blacktop that hovered like an invisible glass bottle over the earth, distorting vision and depth. The only clouds had been swiped across the sky with a dried-out brush.

She and Mike sat in the prickly grass where lawn met lakeshore, close enough to touch, but they did not touch. His wedding band's fierce twinkle made her squint under the searing sun.

Once the area had been a limestone quarry, but floods had turned it into the local lake. The Lion's Club hauled in dirt to make the lake bottom easier on tender feet. A local 4-H club poured some sand at the shallow end of the stone, spilling onto the grass, and made an instant beach.

They watched as the water made weak ripples, tuckered out by the heat. Her skin itched under her damp swimsuit. Heaviness in her ponytail as she swung it side to side told her the end of it was clumped together, wet with sweat. Pulling Minnie Mouse's terry face from her rear, she stood and headed toward the water.

Up to her thighs, she marched right in. She drew a hand through the water, scooping up a disappearing valley next to her hip. It was warm near shore, like the flush of wine as it crawls through cheeks. Then paralyzing cold, a metal fork clank against teeth. She stopped, took a breath, summoned all her warmth, and started again. As she inched, her tiptoes made dents in the muck at the lake bottom. Salty sweat lifted like a film from her back and sides. Arms off the surface, she took bouncing steps.

She lowered her arms. Bubbles tickled as they clung to her arm hair, the leg hair she hadn't shaved, because who knew that Mike was going to stop by her work today and drive her away to the lake? The current pushed between her body and limbs, found space between her feet, knees, thighs.

A flick of copper disturbed the water's surface. She spun her head, but the lake rippled unbroken. A loud, abrupt child's laugh reached her from shore, and she waded in farther, up to her chest. She took in a deep breath, ready to dunk her head and get the cold shock over.

Another flicker of copper, this one in her line of sight. A thin, arrow-shaped head rose up and straightened in her direction. She froze, breath trapped in her chest.

The snake zigzagged toward her, the water gliding off his scales seemed to push him her way faster. Far off, kids still splashed each other in the shallows. She tried to back away, not wanting to turn around. She felt someone fumbling for her hand. Her exhale was a long scream. Mike pulled her onto the beach.

From the place where water covered the tops of their feet, they watched the snake veer off for shady water under a few trees at the edge of the rocky lake. She stumbled to her towel, flopped on her back, arms to her sides, and heaved her chest up and down until she could breathe as normal.

Mike stood by, wringing out his shorts. He stretched out next to her. She watched his right hand put the wedding band back on his left.

"Thank you," she said, looking at the sky so she didn't have to watch his ring glisten.

She felt his right hand in her left.

Awkward placement, his thumb trying to worm its way between her middle and ring fingers. She repositioned and their hands interlaced.

At night, she still reaches out for those fingers, before she realizes they're gone.

She wandered out of the bathroom where their fight had left her and into the kitchen.

Mike sat in their living room, scratching the open air around his bandages. His painkillers sat nearby.

"How're you feeling?" she asked. She pulled a bottle of olive oil from the pantry.

At her voice, he jerked his scratching hand out of sight. "A little tired." He tipped his head onto the back of the couch.

The pain meds had made him sleepy the first few weeks. Lately, though, he had been alert almost all day. She knew he was pretending to be tired so he wouldn't have to talk anymore. She felt hurt, but she also understood. Their conversation always came back to the same thing.

"Okay. I'm just worried about you." She poured the oil into a pan and the hot earthy smell filled the kitchen.

"Well, don't be. I'll be fine." He jerked the remote toward the TV. Music for a car commercial, high and clinking, built a wall against their conversation.

His remaining fingers drummed against the arm of the couch. She watched them come down in order, pinky, ring, middle, pointer. She swore he still had a tan line from his wedding ring, more than a year after he had taken it off for the last time. He claimed he couldn't see it. She squinted close. Yes, she could still see a ring-width path of pale skin, not clear, almost a result of undulating light and shadow.

She would call it that and nothing more, if she didn't always see the line in any light, in every kind of shadow.

Oil ran across as she tipped the pan from side to side.

"What are you going to do about work?"

His eyes didn't leave the careening car on the TV.

"I'll be fine."

In their bedroom, Mike tried to smooth the wallpaper. Right elbow pinned it down. Left hand smoothed. Each time he moved, the paper shifted and bubbled. He couldn't catch it as it fell. He left it. Half up, half down.

The edges curled stiff, and bowed toward their bed in the middle of the room. The white back and yellow front made a disjointed daisy image, which bounced in the ceiling fan's breeze. The nodding flower head watched them sleep. She wanted to finish the job herself. Spread the adhesive. Smooth the paper. Roll the seams. Instead, she stayed out of the room until nighttime when she climbed into bed and pulled the covers up to her chin. Each fan blade wafted an astringent paste smell. The stiffened paper gave a soft crackle with every rotation of the fan.

She sat up in bed. "Mike," she called down the hall.

No answer.

"Mike, are you coming to bed soon?"

In his silence, she got up and went to the living room. He was passed out on the couch in front of the TV. That same high-pitched clinking song played for the same careening car. One sock foot anchored him to the ground. Tapping and squeezing like she was at a horse's leg, she pried it up. She laid it next to his other foot on the far arm of

the couch. She threw a blanket at him, moved his pain meds closer, and went back to the nodding wallpaper.

The angry voice spurted from between the phone and Mike's ear. All day, he had been at the Proughs' house hanging paper, his first time since the operation. A half-eaten mustard and ham sandwich lay where he had dropped it on the counter when the phone rang.

"This is unacceptable. I won't pay for it," the voice said, loud enough for her to hear in the living room.

"What do you mean?" Mike stood at the kitchen sink, connected to the half wall by the telephone cord. He twisted his left hand to hold the phone better. "You think I work for free?"

"The paper isn't even straight." The voice sounded like it came over an intercom, impossible to ignore.

Sarah looked at Mike. Knew he would not say another word.

"The sailboats are sinking into the floor."

She saw Mike bite his lip, felt his silence.

Click.

She shifted her eyes from the screen she hadn't been watching and looked at him.

After he set the phone in its cradle, Mike thumbed a hole in his bandage. The skin must have reopened because the edge of the wrapping was stained brown with blood.

He saw her looking at him.

"Wrong number."

Still rubbing his torn bandage, he walked off.

She sank lower on the couch until her back rested on the seat cushion, a hangnail in the edge of her teeth.

Red and plump, the cherries rolled out of the bag and into the glass bowl. Sarah rinsed them with cold water, working their skin between her fingers.

When they were clean, she drained the water and started on the piecrust, cutting lard into flour until it all turned to crumbles.

He still refused any kind of prosthetic hand.

"Mike thinks prosthetics look worse than nothing," she always explained to those who asked and those who didn't. Like a drowned man's hand, bloated pale.

"Cherry pie for dinner?" Mike dropped his tool belt next to the kitchen table.

She jumped, surprised.

Mike swatted her backside.

"You're home early. I was going to surprise you." She wiped a loose strand of hair away with the back of her floury hand.

He walked to the fridge and took a long drink of milk from the carton.

"How was work?" She pressed the crumbles together against a dish.

"You have flour all over." He wiped at her eyebrows and dusted off her t-shirt. "It's even in your hair."

Long strong fingers pulled at the whitened strands. A flash of ring-width white skin caught her eye.

"How was work?" She wanted to know if he was keeping up, if he was adjusting in some way she hadn't been able to, never would be able to.

He shrugged.

"These look delicious." He reached across her and fumbled for a cherry.

She watched the fruit pop between his teeth, its red juice filling the cracks between them and sliding under his tongue.

The road is longer than it seemed on the map. Her socks slip down into her shoes, and the canvas rubs against her heels.

She wants to turn around. Do this another night. Drive next time.

The night noises: hoots, howls, rustlings, barks, all penetrate her ears in jolts.

Ears wide open, she stops and bends. Wobbling, she spreads her toes to keep the shoe on while she tugs her sock back in place. A pair of yellow eyes stare from the ditch, then they disappear.

Her sock is damp now, cool underneath her foot. She turns around. The glow from town, too faint to offer any light on the road, only seems to magnify the darkness outside her flashlight beam. She thinks of Mike at home on the couch, still avoiding the nodding wallpaper.

In her head, the paper moves under the whirring fan and she finds herself nodding along with its rhythm. On she moves, nodding her head, shuffling at the gravel.

Even on her tiptoes, she couldn't reach it. A small brown box of things Mike gave her.

Chocolates. Cards. A blue bird figurine named Percy. On the desk below sat a small, shriveled rubber hand the color of a grimy pecan. She had taken Mike's credit card, gone to the toy aisle at the grocery store, right next to the family planning section, and bought the thing. Just Add Water! the vibrant pink and orange package exclaimed.

Will grow to 600% its size! At first, she had not seen the hand sold separately, and had almost bought the variety pack complete with the hand, a yellow dinosaur, an egg, and a couple pastel pellets that would hatch chicks. Then she saw it, almost lost in the bordering colorful condom package display, the rubber hand alone in its box. She made sure it was a right hand, fingernails on top and thumb to the left, and started to the front of the store. Eyes open for anyone she might know, she wound her way through aisles of soup, bread, cereal, flour, and sherbet. The whole time she kept the hand low, wondering why they had to make the box so damn colorful. When she'd walked down every aisle, and some twice, she shuffled to the checkout counter. The conveyer belt made too loud a whine as it moved the box down toward the cash register. She looked around to see who was watching. She forced a smile at the kind-looking old man behind the register, who gave her a disapproving look. She blushed, embarrassed at what he thought. Two dollars fifty cents, and she was out the door with her purchase. It was hers.

Now she leaned forward and swiped at the brown box. Pushed it to the back of the shelf. Anger, hot and red in her cheeks, washed over her. She wobbled on the cheap plastic office chair.

"What do you need?" asked Mike as he wandered in. "I can get it for you."

"So can I," she said.

She stretched as far as possible and yanked at the box. Hard. Tipped to the right. Fell.

He reached out to grab her, break her fall, with his right hand.

She landed with an audible thunk. Chocolate and cards went everywhere. In the corner, the bird figurine broke.

Up on the desk, a shriveled piece of dark flesh-colored rubber jumped with the impact.

He stared down his arm. "I forgot."

The washer door wafted a musty smell. She remembered a dog she'd had when she was younger, and how he smelled after a bath. She shut the lid.

She heard Mike spit into the bathroom sink, and waited for the water to stop running.

"Ugh. These clothes smell," she said. She opened the machine again and leaned her face into the washer. Jeans, overalls, stained t-shirts, sweatshirts all flattened against the side of the machine. They must have been in there for at least four days. "And they're all yours," she added.

Mike came around the corner, toothbrush still in his mouth. He worked the handle up and down with his cheek.

"Sorry," he said around the brush. "I'll move them to the dryer later."

"They're still going to smell after they dry. Do you want to wash them again?" She reached for the detergent bottle.

He tapped the brush against the air. Water droplets flew. "I'll put in extra dryer sheets later."

"Why don't you do it now? It's only a few clothes."

He glanced at his bandaged hand. "I don't want to."

A sigh she didn't mean to sigh escaped her lips as he walked away. Piece by piece, she moved the clothes up to the dryer.

She would go, she thought.

She would go to Cate's house and get back what should have always been hers.

Water pounded into the machine's tub. While she waited for it to fill, she grabbed a small piece of rubber off her desk. A twist of the knob stopped the water, and she dropped the brown shriveled hand in.

It expanded a little. She closed the washer. Each hour would make it larger, until it was waterlogged and pale.

She would go that night.

She sees it up ahead. White house, yellow trim. Huge, as she'd expected. Softly glowing through the oak tree branches. If the leaves weren't already falling, she might have missed it. Darkness outside illuminates everything within. She thinks of Mike living in this house, slinking back to it every morning after being with her. Now he is home on their couch, the whispering daisy wallpaper in the other room nodding in measure with the ceiling fan. She keeps nodding along. Her determination hardens, and she makes her way toward the yellow trim.

Crunching acorns underfoot, she inches toward the nearest window. The pane begins at her thigh. She clutches the side of the house and peers inside.

Wood dining table. Flower paintings on the walls: Fuschias. Violets. Bleeding hearts. A stack of magazines spread like a fan on a solid wood table. The plushy rug.

And Cate on it. Standing, twirling slow. Head forward. One hand holds the end of her long linen skirt. The other is poised midair, resting on an invisible shoulder.

Mike's hand, the gory end encased in shiny plaster, is attached to the small of Cate's back. They dance to music from a subscription channel, Cate and Mike's hand. The TV's otherwise black screen shows a blue bar and white type at the bottom of the

easy listening station. Cate's wedding ring throws up a white sparkle as it passes the window and continues in the twirl.

Slow, unrushed. They have all her life to do just this.

Twirl.

Twirl.

Twirl.

CHAPTER 8

WATCH/WARNING

They come to dance. As usual, they know neither bride nor groom. They've driven half an hour to Des Moines to make chances better they won't know anyone else, either. Like the other guests, they've had the date marked for weeks. Unlike the other guests, they've been careful to show up once the reception is already well underway.

Maurice arrives alone. This is unusual. He makes his way across the hotel lobby, lets party sounds guide to him the ballroom door. He slips inside, lets a crack of light into the room. No one notices. Tables have been pushed aside to make room for other activities. He walks in as the bride throws the bouquet over her head. He finds Bernice when she catches the bunch of white peonies. She does so in an easy motion, reaches out and takes them while other ladies lean away. Clapping, and the crowd closes. Bernice blushes and catches Maurice's eye, lets him know she'd already seen him. The music starts. Maurice joins his daughter, but doesn't take her hand to begin the dance as he normally would. His arms hang at his sides, an awkward refusal to carry on tradition.

When he can speak he says, "That's a prophetic bouquet you have there." He glances at his daughter's fingers, one on the left with a new diamond, one on the right newly denuded.

"I didn't know if you'd still come," she says.

He doesn't say anything, just looks at her until a new song starts. He thinks thanks to the DJ it's fast. Slower songs mean room for conversation, and he doesn't feel like talking to her right now. He manages to hold out his hand. She takes it, and they begin their dance.

Bernice and Maurice. The father-daughter dancing pair. He in a black tux with sparkle stripes and she in a jewel tone dress, they took titles in New York, Texas, L.A., even London once. He was spry for his age and could still outdo the other dancers, in some cases decades younger than him.

They dance to remember those days, cut short by Maurice's car accident the year before. He can't do the kicks, the highsteps, the two-person somersaults. No more leapfrogging, no fast and furious footwork. He can't pick his daughter up or swing her across his torso to slide between his shoes. His close-fitting black and white suits hang in his closet. A neat row, still in dry cleaner bags. The hangers say We Heart Our Customers. On weekends, instead of driving to Missouri or catching a plane to Boston, he pokes around in his garden and has coffee with the local farmers at McDonalds. The injury aged him early, and dancing now is for relaxation and catching up, the same any other father and daughter might over a glass of wine or a family dinner.

They swivel and turn. Step together and apart. She turns, he leans. He turns, she leans. These nights, they swing, they waltz, they polka, they tango, they trot. If they feel like showing off, they Charleston. They do the Chicken Dance and the YMCA with as much enthusiasm as the rest of the tipsy partygoers. They link arms with strangers to do-si-do, follow the bride's made-up dance moves to Johnny Cash, and place themselves in the middle of line dances.

They go home laughing, stone sober but lightheaded from the evening.

But tonight Maurice has not intention of laughing or relaxing. He hadn't been sure he would come. He left Bernice to find her own parking spot, keep herself dry in the pouring rain, and drive herself home. He swivels, turns, steps, but they're just motions. He's here to continue a tradition he couldn't stand to kill.

He wasn't always a dancer. For years he taught high school phys ed. He enjoyed it, and congratulated himself on finding a job where he could play games all day with a thousand other young people. Heather didn't enjoy it. She pointed out that he used his four-year degree, the one that took him halfway across the country from her, to play Chicago-style kickball and mark down students' running times. When the school board required he get his Master's within two years, he took correspondence classes and studied nights. The hours between Heather's bedtime and when he had to work weren't long enough. He didn't finish in time.

When he worked up enough courage to tell her he'd lost his job, she was calm. She hugged him and put Bernice to bed. He made a spot to sleep on the couch.

When he woke, she was gone. She didn't leave a note. All of her things were still in their places. He went to her mother's. She wasn't there. No one had heard from her. After two days, he reported her missing. He found her wedding ring in the freezer door. The police said sometimes grown people run away and closed the investigation. They didn't share his surprise that Heather had taken off.

He remembered her as vibrant, adventurous, speaking her mind even when it got her in trouble. A young energy would prompt her to go mushroom hunting and make dinner from what she found. He was surprised every day the woman he married was

nothing like that. The one he married was withdrawn, her feelings and opinions shrouded in mist. She was uninterested in almost everything, spent full afternoons looking out the same window. Once in a while something would break through, catch her attention. A bird's nest in the eaves or the way cherries shine when submerged in water, but he could never know what it would be. He only managed it once, when he put heather stems in a glass of milk. She smiled and put it on her bedside table until the milk soured and the flowers molded and he had to throw it away.

She'd taken off before for a few nights at a time to the shallow woods in back of the subdivision. Maurice hated sleeping outside, and she never invited him or Bernice. It was clear she needed the time. He could always tell when she needed to leave. Days before, she'd snap at anyone who spoke to her. She'd slam food on the table, throw laundry into the dryer, pummel the broom into the floor. When she came back, things would be calm again. Maurice would make a bad joke about full moons and everything would be normal for a while.

Days went by. She didn't come back. He looked for her in the woods. He took five granola bars, some bottled water. He stayed out three days. He went hoarse calling her name. It was getting colder and at night he shivered away two or three hours of sleep before starting his search again. The woods were not large or thick. He could walk them in a few hours. Early morning on the third day he came to the same small creek he'd passed dozens of times. She wasn't in the woods. He would have found her already.

Although the creek had iced near its banks, the current was still open water. He pushed on the thin ice with his boot toe. It cracked and he watched as a slab floated downstream. The next second he was in the icy water. The creek hit him at the knee. He

kneeled and let the water run over his thighs. In big dripping handfuls he scooped black mud off the bottom and smeared it on his face, his arms, his hands. He rubbed mud in his hair until he could pull it straight up in a spine that ran the length of his head. Mud crept into his mouth, and he swallowed it. When he was covered, he made noises so strangled and heartrending any swamp monster nearby would have thought he was one of them.

He woke up to two kids poking him with a stick.

"What is it?" he heard one say. They poked his eyelid and he roared off the bank. He heard their screams behind him as he clambered into the woods on all fours.

He went in the back door at home, showered off everything except the mud stuck under his nails, and drifted around the house like a ghost, too tired to sleep, too awake to be conscious.

He dances steps that allow him to hold only the tips of Bernice's fingers and keeps her at a distance. He's careful not to look straight at her. She inherited her mother's upturned nose, her long forehead, attached ears, and freckles. At other times, this made him happy, even calm. Now, he can feel anger growing in his stomach, unsettling the juices and threatening to explode through his mouth.

Two boys and a small girl hold hands and spin in a circle in front of the DJ's speakers. During breaks in their dance, the girl pulls her skirt up in front of her face. Her mother comes over every time to pull it back down.

The bride dances with her father. Both are horrible at keeping rhythm, but they're smiling. Maurice knows that could be him in a few months. Will be him, if he decides to go to his Bernice's wedding. After dancing with her at dozens of receptions, he has ideas about how a father-daughter dance should go, which song should be played, when in the

night the dance should take place. He doesn't know how he can miss it, but he doesn't know how he can even consider going.

Although their house was large, he and Bernice lived in a small section of it after Heather disappeared. He moved his clothes and pillow into the room down the hall from Bernice and shut doors to rooms they didn't use anymore.

His mother-in-law showed up one night, the most proper woman he'd ever known, piss drunk. Bottle of corn whiskey still in her hand. Barefoot, her manicured toes sparkling under the subdivision streetlights. Her hair was wild gray roots.

He came to the door. She heaved the bottle at him. Missed. A loud crash as glass smashed against the brick house.

"You made her go away!" she screamed. "It's your fault! She hated you! She told me she hated you! You ruined her!" Spit foamed in the crevices of her mouth. Her voice cracked and she sobbed.

Maurice said nothing. He closed the storm door and watched her shuffle away into the night.

That's when he turned to Elvis.

He locked himself in a room and let his old vinyls scrape under the needle of an all but broken record player. He played the records he had, skipping the faster songs, but only Elvis made him feel better. His voice was washing machine vibrations and Maurice felt like a fussy infant as they soothed him half to sleep.

One night, out of boredom, he gelled his poofy black hair into a pompadour and trimmed his sideburns. He held a picture of Elvis next to his head in the mirror. The hair was a match. He bought the typical outfit: white bedazzled jacket and pants and red

open-chested shirt. He practiced his hip movements in Heather's full-length mirror. He and Bernice ate peanut butter banana bacon sandwiches for two weeks straight.

The first time he walked into a bar as the King, people wouldn't let him be. They wanted him to sing.

"I don't have my music with me," he told them.

"Elvis doesn't need his music to sing," a woman shouted.

He knew he'd have to perform. Knew also that he'd wanted this to happen. But he only was only comfortable enough with one Elvis song. As he trimmed his sideburns and styled his pompadour, he would sing it to himself in the mirror. Because he was lonesome. Every night.

There was no stage. He stood between two bar stools and faced the room. The whole place was quiet. He warbled vowels, made his voice lower and rounder. He sang for them. And dammit, he was good.

There were lots of women. They liked the King. He danced with them and sang to them. He brought them home, both stumbling and bumping into things in the dark. He sent the babysitter off, avoiding her eyes.

One night he heard a scream and jumped awake. In the dark, a small shadow ran up to his bed. Confused by sleep, he drew back, snatched his arm away when the shadow grabbed at it.

The shadow bent in half and cried. It was Bernice. Of course it was.

"There's someone in the house." She leaned in, bright tears, her voice a frantic whisper.

Behind her under a hallway light was his date.

She stood cross-armed in rumpled underwear. "You didn't tell me you had a kid," she said.

The morning after, Bernice chomped on her rice cereal and he turned a ring around in his hand. He watched her small fingers grip the spoon and thought maybe she was too young for this kind of present. But after his date left, he'd felt it was the right thing to do. The only thing to do.

"Bernice," he said. He always used her full name, pleased at the way it rhymed with his own. "I have a present for you."

Bernice dropped her spoon, cereal forgotten, and milk splattered. She held out her hand.

"This one is very special," he said. He put the diamond ring into her small sweaty palm. "It's Mom's wedding ring. I need you to hold onto it for me and keep good track of it. Can you do that?"

She nodded. She slipped the ring over her thumb. It fell to one side. She frowned. Maurice turned away to hold his face in his hands. He felt like he'd admitted Heather was never coming home, and the room was tilting.

When he turned back around, Bernice was threading the ring onto a silver chain around her neck. When her fingers got big enough, it moved to her right hand, but she never took it off.

The music slows and Maurice steps back. He and Bernice stand in the middle of the dance floor until another couple nudges them to the outskirts with their gyrating hips. The couple doesn't notice, just keeps backing up. Maurice steps, Bernice following, and the couple dances closer. Three times, and they're at the edge of the party.

Bernice bites her lip and focuses on something across the room. Maurice shuffles his feet and is about to excuse himself when she says, "Severe storm warnings tonight."

Maurice nods, not in the mood for small talk. "I know."

"On the way in, the radio said perfect conditions for a tornado."

"It's always perfect tornado conditions about now," he says. "Happens every summer."

Maurice clears his throat. Bernice looks at the carpet. They stand apart together, not looking at each other.

A hand clamps on Maurice's shoulder, startles him. He looks at his daughter to see a hand her shoulder too, her mouth in a small o, and he turns to a sloppy man smiling in his face.

"Hey friends," the man says. Bernice lowers her shoulder and his hand drops. "I saw you out there." He points at the dance floor with his drink, the red liquid sloshing dangerous to the top of his clear plastic cup. "You two are good dancers."

"Thanks," says Maurice, and Bernice nods.

The man lingers, fidgets his legs. "Good dancers," he says again. "You look so serious, though. Dancing is supposed to be fun."

Familiar downbeats play as he says it, one of those party dances where everyone knows the hand movements. Lines form, and the sloppy man smiles again, pulls Bernice into the crowd. Maurice sees her look to him for help. He turns and goes outside to watch the rain.

He was at the farmer's market during the last tornado watch. When the wind picked up and the sirens went off, everyone kept smelling cantaloupes and peeling back

cornhusks. There are plenty of stories about tornadoes in Madison, but one hasn't landed in two in anyone's lifetime. Most say it's the floating girl, a child who was supposedly sucked up in a tornado, lost her limbs, and without them became so light she landed in the clouds. Because of her, tornadoes may touch down nearby, but they never cross Madison's border. Maurice has never given much thought to whether he believes it. It doesn't much matter. The outcome is the same.

He drove home with some tomatoes and walked in to find Bernice rearranging his pantry.

She was leaned over pulling at something on the floor, a can of tomato paste held out in her right hand to be put on the counter when she stood up. He studied the hand. Her mother's ring wasn't on her finger.

"Bernice," he said.

She swung her head out of the pantry, almost hitting it on the hanging spice rack. "You scared me," she said. "How was the market today?"

"Where's your ring?" he asked.

She looked at the ground, and she didn't have to say anything. Maurice yanked the can out of her hand and walked to his bedroom with it. He slammed the door.

Half an hour later, he heard her car drive away and went downstairs to every item arranged in alphabetical order. The tomatoes he bought sat in a basket between the salt and the vegetable oil. He rolled the large city trashcan into the kitchen and threw away everything she'd touched.

As the rain comes down, Maurice thinks of all the roles he's played, all the identities that didn't suit him. How soon he may have to add father to that list. Long

piercing alarms sound, and he watches the sky, glad for at least that one constant, the summer tornado sirens.

Bernice's phone alerts her that tornado watch has turned to warning. But some say it's good luck to have tornadoes on your wedding day. As Maurice goes out, sirens sound through the open door. The bride smiles and everyone keeps dancing.

Surrounded by people, Bernice does the line dances by herself, the sloppy man disappeared to hassle someone else. She feels awkward, like her lonesomeness is visible to everyone. Difficult, dancing to steps meant for tipsy people having a good time in the company of friends. She wants to sit down, blend into some corner, but she dances instead. She dances so when her father comes back he'll think he hasn't shaken her. She dances to forget the itch on her right ring finger that bothers her so much she's scratched it raw and has to cover it with calamine.

Her mother destroyed her father. Even at five, Bernice understood that. Some of her earliest memories are of his destruction. Sitting at the kitchen table, spinning the Lazy Susan with one finger for hours. Butter tray, salt and pepper shakers, sugar pot made hundreds of revolutions. She sat with him until her eyes blurred and she got sick from the constant spinning. He never said a word, never looked at her, never moved position. He slept in a bed covered with her mother's clothes. Pulled straight out of the closet and dresser, some with hangers still on. He burrowed into them so deep sometimes she couldn't tell if he was in the pile or not.

Bernice also remembers, even at five, her anger.

She tore holes in her wallpaper.

She left all the outside doors open in December and sat shivering as cold air and snow whistled in. She let all semblance of personal hygiene go. She wanted her dad to say something, say her breath stunk and she should brush her teeth. She wanted her mom to come back, to smile at the open doors and have a winter picnic with snow swirling around them. Turkey sandwiches and chips and hot cocoa. Instead, she wrapped a blanket around herself, pulled on her thick nylon snow mittens, and turned her walls into a coloring book. Dark crayons and paints and markers covered the cheerful daisy pattern.

Mid do-si-do with a large woman, Maurice returns. He stands in the back of the ballroom, hands in pockets. Bernice leaves the guests to turn each other around by the elbows and hands. As she moves toward her dad, he steps forward into the whirling crowd, takes someone's outstretched hand, and is whisked away in a succession of crisscrossing turns. She rejoins the group, but with each exchange he chooses a partner far away from where she is. The people Bernice dances with laugh, smile, spill their drinks on the floor. As they make the rounds to dance with every other person, Bernice chases her father around the floor. She makes eye contact with her next partner, smiles and links arms or hands, then turns and finds Maurice. He never meets her eye, but dances in the opposite direction from her, making sure they never get close enough for her to be his next partner. She chooses partners ever closer, but there's an unspoken rhythm to the dance, a certain amount of time to spend with each person, and breaking rhythm will leave her standing in the middle of the churning dancers. For each person she gets closer, he gets one further away.

The song is in its last chorus. The instruments have dropped out and the singer's voice echoes the fast paced words one last time. She will catch him. She reaches out as

far as she can for the next exchange, grabs a hand, and steps toward it. Her foot, stretching out too far on the polished floor, slides away from her. She grabs onto strangers to right herself, but she is falling, falling, and as the song's last notes play, she is on the floor, her ass stinging, her legs splayed, her dress scrunched up around her thighs. As she tries to recover, she sees her father's face. Their eyes lock, then the crowd pushes toward her, blocks her view.

Although she waves them off, doing her best to smile, they help her up and set her on a chair. Someone brings her a drink and an ice water. Her father is nowhere in sight. She searches the crowd for his shiny dark pompadour, a lasting relic from the Elvis days, and a tear drops into her lap.

She was proud of her father who was Elvis. Elvis Dad went out, did things, read her stories, sang her songs. She got to take him to show and tell and the class missed half their math lesson because the teacher let him sing and tell stories for a full hour. She realized only later he'd been sleeping with that teacher.

Elvis Dad taught her to dance, took her to jazz, ballet, tap lessons every week. Got her on a competitive dance team. He sang with her in the car and took her to Nashville one July and bought her leather cowgirl boots. He let her eat ice cream and popcorn for dinner whenever.

But Elvis wasn't really her dad. She's never known her dad. She only knows who he's become in the last twenty years, like they both grew up and found themselves together. Except he keeps refinding himself. Just when she thinks she has a grip on him, he changes again. The Maurice Henby she knows is more of a close business partner than a father. She only remembers in the hazy way of childhood memories the jocose

man from home videos of her first birthdays and vacations, with messy dark hair and a smile that showed all his teeth.

She goes to wash her face, hopes cold water will stop the hot tears she can feel building. In the bathroom, she can hear the storm better. The ceiling echoes wind, thunder crashes, and rain static. Like everyone else, she usually doesn't worry about tornadoes. For a minute though, as she listens to a new round of sirens echo against porcelain in the empty bathroom, she feels afraid. A deep pang of fear freezes her. She knows the stories of people caught by tornadoes while driving and forced to take cover in ditches. Those who went into bathrooms like this one and came out to find the rest of the building in pieces up and down the street. She takes deep breaths. Don't be ridiculous, she tells herself. A tornado in the city is almost as unlikely as one in Madison.

Still, no matter how poorly the evening is going, she isn't going to drive home until the storm blows over.

Maurice is back in the ballroom. He stands off to one side leaning against the wall, nursing a drink. Bernice is surprised. Her father never drinks. But she can tell from the way he winces at each sip that he has liquor in his cup.

Two lines have formed, splitting the floor in half. The line in front of the bride is all men, in front of the groom all women. A jar sits on a stool. People in line hold a bill they'll give to the bride or the groom in exchange for a short dance.

Bernice sits down near her father. With a sigh, he comes and takes the chair next to her.

"That drunk guy told me you fell," he says. "Are you okay?"

"You saw," she said, her voice tired. "I saw that you saw. Strangers had to help me up because you wouldn't."

He looks at her, his eyes dark, his pupils big. His hair is flat in places from the rain. He doesn't respond. She sees him glance at her finger, then grunt and shift his gaze to the dance floor.

That ring haunted her. She knew her dad was happy she never took it off, but she didn't keep it on for sentimental reasons. She had no sentimental feelings for her mother. She kept it on because it was a symbol of who she was. Because if she took it off, something bad might happen. For a long time, she hadn't felt like her life was her own. She was defined by things that happened in the past, by her father's grief and destruction, by her mother's selfish strangeness. Her name rhymed with her father's. From the beginning she had no chance of being her own.

The night her boyfriend proposed, she took off her mother's ring. At home, alone, she felt the bad juju radiating from it like beams off a flashlight. She knew it was supposed to be her wedding ring, but she cringed at the thought of moving it to her left hand.

Bernice put the ring in a shoebox at the bottom of her wardrobe and covered it with old sweatshirts. But she knew it was there, she could feel it was there. All night the ring made its presence known, waking her up out of a dead sleep to remind her it wasn't on her finger where it thought it belonged.

The next morning, head aching from too little sleep, Bernice took the ring into town.

Mrs. Love collected wedding diamonds.

Bernice heard the women talk. If your marriage fell apart, or your husband died and you needed a little cash, Mrs. Love would pay appraisal price for your stones. Bernice knew she would take good care of her mother's ring.

When Mrs. Love wanted to pay her for the diamond, she couldn't take the money. It wasn't money she wanted. She left it there without a penny for it.

She thought after it was gone, she'd be happy. That without it around, she would be able to take control. She walked away from Mrs. Love's house feeling lighter than she had in two decades. But it still haunted her. Her father wouldn't let it go, and when he wasn't there, the red itchy band around her right ring finger was never far from her mind.

She hears her father draw in a large breath, knows he's looking at her bare finger still. "Bernice," Maurice says, not looking at her. "Bernice, I wish you had more respect for me than to sell your mother's wedding ring." He pauses. Then adds, "I'm ashamed of you."

A whistling starts in Bernice's head. "I'm ashamed of you." She blurts it out. Her face is red hot. She can barely hear her own words above the teakettle screaming through her thoughts. Something breaks and she pours the hot water on. "When you slept with all those women, we both knew she wasn't dead. You didn't even know she was gone for good. You were selfish and lonely and you dishonored her in her own house. You know what I think? I think if I were your wife, I would have left you too." She hisses the words, not wanting the crowd to overhear.

Close as they are, she's never told him the things she knows. This is as close as she's come. She counted almost one hundred different women he brought home in the three years after her mother disappeared. She knows about the doctor's appointments,

the medication. She knows came within fifteen minutes of sending her to live with her grandma, herself a mess of grief and barely getting by. Her cousin told her he checked her wedding RSVP as not attending before ripping it up and trashing it.

He stares at her. A long, calculating stare, taking her every measurement. Then he gets up.

"And if you don't want to come to my wedding over that stupid ring, don't bother. I don't need you," she says.

The number of waiting dancers has dwindled and it's Maurice's turn as soon as he steps into line. He hands the bride a bill and they dance, dance like he and Bernice will not at Bernice's wedding. It's meant to hurt, to betray, and it does.

Eyes pricking, Bernice leaves the ballroom. As she goes through the turning doors of the hotel, the doorman smiles at her. She swallows a sob and nods back. Alone in a wing of the revolving door, tears fall just long enough to splotch her face before the wind blows them away. It's no longer raining, and she looks up to the sky.

Bernice has never seen a tornado. For those who live in Tornado Alley, it's not rare to see a funnel cloud poke its finger down from its fist of sky, curl down to earth, then change its mind and retract back into the storm. But Bernice has never even seen this. She's seen the sky turn a sick dark green, heard the sirens, had the jarring alarm beeps on the radio and TV interrupt her program, but as for a tornado forming, she's only seen pictures in science books.

So when she sees the funnel cloud above her, dark in a dark sky, the edges of it just illuminated by light pollution, she stops in the middle of the sidewalk and stares, her neck folded, chin up to it. The night is silent now. The only noise is from a slow stream

of cars in the street in front of her and faint club music a few blocks away. She looks up the number for the National Weather Service and dials. She knows in a minute, the funnel will retract back into the neighboring clouds, that it's a false alarm, but she reports it anyway. As she walks toward the club music, her phone beeps to let her know a new warning has been issued. The sirens sound. She imagines the long finger of the tornado reaching down and taking her up, up, away.

CHAPTER 9

SHE DOESN'T LIVE THERE ANYMORE

The night Clegg and his longtime girlfriend Darby moved into the haunted house, Clegg slept better than he had in months. He woke up after noon and shuffled downstairs. Darby was in front of the computer she had stacked on a tower of boxes. With rapid clicks, she moved things around the screen.

Clegg looked around, wondered which box held the coffee pot. The thought of searching for it was too much. He sat on the on the couch arm. "Before coffee?" he asked, gesturing at the computer.

She reached to one side, picked up a cardboard coffee mug and shook it at him. The few drops left made weak splashes. She set her cup down and picked up another one, this one full from the way she held it steady at the lip.

"This one's yours." She turned back to the screen.

Images of their house stacked like cards in front of her. Clegg saw two of the outside and four or five of the interior. "What are you doing?" he asked.

She clicked hard on one of the exterior photos. A little girl's face appeared in the right bottom window. "I'm adding ghosts," she said.

A roadtrip east started it. After Clegg quit his job at the state's largest financial services company, and budget cuts lost Darby her teaching position, they scrabbled around for a while, living with friends and charging cheap rooms. When their friends

were tired of them and Clegg couldn't stand one more hotel, they started east, not knowing or caring if they'd ever go back to Madison, Iowa.

In Tennessee or Kentucky, they stopped at a haunted house, the kind that gives tours and has visitors year round. They'd been in the car for eight hours already and bickering most of the way. Darby criticized Clegg's habit of driving in the passing lane. Clegg said at least he wasn't a dangerous driver, and mentioned the accident she'd had the previous winter. Darby stopped talking. He kept saying, "You ignoring me now?" while she stared out the window with her arms crossed. When Clegg saw the billboard announcing "One of the Most Haunted Destinations," he figured it would be better to take their bad moods out on strangers, and pulled off.

The sign at the register said an overnight stay ran five hundred dollars for up to six people.

Clegg put his hand on Darby's shoulder. She still hadn't spoken to him. He pointed at the sign. "You think people really think do that?" he asked. "For five hundred dollars?"

She smiled, a small victory, and shrugged. He laughed, but the small woman behind the counter pressed her lips thin. "If you want to schedule an overnight today," she said, "our first opening is in six months."

Clegg hadn't meant to be overheard. His cheeks burned. He glanced at Darby. All her attention was on the small woman.

"How often do you have people here?" Darby asked. "Like, once a week?"

The woman shook her head. "Every night," she said. "January through December."

Two women with large purses pushed between Darby and Clegg, cameras held high, to show the woman the strange images they'd captured on their tour and see if she might want to display them others in the lobby.

"That place is raking in money," Darby said back in the car.

"Maybe we should open a haunted house," Clegg said, and laughed. Darby smiled, too. He turned the radio on and they sped further east.

The credit ran out and they ended right back in Madison, Iowa, right in with Darby's parents. After three days, Clegg couldn't take her mother's chickens anymore. The yard was bird shit and feathers and the fermented smell of wet feed everywhere. In the attic, he sat on the narrow bed. Listened to the rest of them move around downstairs. Pretended to read the newspaper. The Garson house was for sale, dirt-cheap, as-is. When he showed Darby, he expected resistance. Instead, she grinned and called the number.

Clegg hit hard, drove the post into the ground until he was sure the sign would stay. The Garson House, it read. He'd won the battle with Darby against The Olde Garson house and compromised on a calligraphy-style font that he still thought was hard to read. In the entryway, behind the new glass door, Darby hung her photos, strange orbs and lights and half-formed faces placed in each one.

An older man in pleated pants and a denim ball cap shuffled down the sidewalk toward Clegg. From the way he walked, his strides loose and comfortable, Clegg figured he lived in the neighborhood, had probably been around a long time. Clegg clutched his lead hammer tight as the man got close.

"What you doing?" the man asked.

He stood a good three feet away and kept his hands in his pockets. "I heard the noise from my place."

"Putting up this sign." Clegg hammered the post once. "Where do you live?"

Giving Clegg a wide berth, the man stepped around and onto the lawn. He read the sign, made a growly noise through his nose.

Clegg opened his mouth to tell the man to get the hell off his property, but stopped when he heard music drifting from his house. He strained to hear it. The melody was fast, rising and falling, full of island and ukulele and vowels. And underneath, a scratchy static, like something on an old record player. He and Darby didn't own anything like it.

"You have a permit for this?" The man squinted at Clegg. If he heard the music, he didn't show any sign of it.

Clegg looked at the man but didn't focus. "Excuse me, I have to go," he said. He was already walking toward the house.

He only half-heard the man calling behind him. "I'll be keeping on eye on you, young man. It's not smart to make a mockery of the dead, if that's what you're planning."

Darby was stepping down a ladder when Clegg got inside. He winced, felt an unnamed fear for her, and held it steady until she was on the floor.

"Who was that outside?" she asked. She rubbed at drip of paint on her cheek and smeared it dry.

"Who?" The music had stopped. As hard as he tried, Clegg couldn't hear it.

"That man outside." Darby took a few steps toward the living room.

She liked to have conversations while she did other things, yelling to make herself heard from the other side of the house, then lowering her voice as she moved into the same room again. This time she stopped and stood still. "What's the matter?" she asked.

"He was just someone who doesn't seem to like us very much. Did you hear that music just now?" Clegg was starting to think it had been in his head.

"Of course," Darby said. Didn't you leave it playing?" She struggled with the ladder latches. One of them was rusted and always refused to collapse.

Clegg loosened the latch with an upward punch. "No, it started while I was outside. I don't own any music like that. Do you?" He tucked the ladder under one arm

"Of course not, but I didn't know what you might have found in the basement. I thought it was something you unearthed down there."

Clegg didn't say anything.

"Will you take this to the garage?" Darby tilted the ladder toward him.

He tucked it under one arm.

"Thanks," she said. "It's too heavy for me." He nodded, caught himself chewing his lip. He always did when he was stressed. He stopped, but too late. She'd seen it.

"Nothing to worry about, Clegg. Maybe someone else was playing music loud and the wind carried it over here."

He nodded. He didn't know what else it could be.

In the garage, he thought he heard it again. He couldn't be sure if it was really there or just the hum of the house mixing with his memory. Quiet, a whisper fleeting, just a few bars then gone.

Clegg and Darby knew the house was practically free because of its history.

It was an old story, and Darby was convinced it would be enough to draw visitors. Four decades earlier, Gabby Garson had killed her husband. At least everyone claimed she did. The police had never been able to prove it. Mr. Garson was a strong man who lifted weights in his basement every night. The police found him down there, strangled under the barbell pressed to his neck.

On the corner of Vine and Jesup, in a once-prospering area of town surrounded by large neglected oak trees that hung over and into the road, the house had been empty since Gabby Garson died inside. The neighborhood had run itself down. Sun-bleached broken toys poked through the melting snow, rusted trucks parked in front lawn mud ruts. Trash in the gutters at least three years old. Darby said the neighborhood set the right tone for their coming attraction.

They didn't know that Gabby Garson had been a hoarder. When Clegg and Darby stepped inside with the realtor, it smelled like a dead mouse Clegg found in his car's heater once. Other people had been dumping their own trash inside. The smashed windows, trampled hedges, credit card offers and empty prescription bottles differentiated their trash from Mrs. Garson's hoard. Their way of serving her justice, Clegg figured.

In a dark basement room, they found a flattened cat corpse under a box, so dry and preserved at first Darby was convinced it had been taxidermied. Clegg had let it sit in the damp April air where the smell convinced her otherwise.

The basement was the worst part of the house. It smelled like feces and urine and the trash on the floor was so dense, Clegg couldn't tell what crunched under his footsteps wherever he walked. Sometimes Clegg would see things slink in his peripheral vision,

though nothing was there when he looked. He set live traps to catch the rats or raccoons or whatever had made the basement home.

Darby wouldn't go back down after the cat.

"What do we do?" she asked when after three hours of work Clegg hadn't been able to clear even a large enough space to turn around in, his traps turned up empty. "People will want to see the basement. That's where it happened."

They closed the door to the basement stairs.

"We'll get back to it," Clegg said. "When the rest of the house is ready and we're moved in, we'll get back to it."

Papers covered the dining room table. The old chandelier, still dusty, missing crystals, held up with a zip tie, hovered low enough that Clegg had to hunch underneath to look at the promotional materials the account representative brought over. He was still there, an older man in his fifties or sixties named Joshua, perched on a wooden chair in the corner, and Clegg was distracted by his shifting eyes, the restless way he crossed one leg over one thigh and then the other. When he pulled at his collar, struggled with the tight button at the neck, Clegg stepped away from the table.

"Can I get you something?" Clegg asked him. "You don't look well."

"I shouldn't have come here. I knew I shouldn't have come here." The man's mutter was high-pitched and Clegg felt for his phone in his pocket, feeling that the man was on the verge of a breakdown.

He called for Darby, not wanting to take his eyes off Joshua. "Darby, we need some water." He tried to keep his voice level but the man was unnerving him. His Adam's apple moved with each hard swallow.

His eyes didn't land on any one thing in the room. Hands on his knees, he leaned forward as if ready to make an escape.

"What's the matter?" Clegg asked, and the cold feeling he'd been getting lately chilled his skin again, settled down in his bones. He shivered.

A change of light. Clegg didn't know if he'd just blinked too long or the chandelier had flickered. He tried to decide based on Joshua's reaction, but the man looked beyond being affected by lights going on and off.

"It's been so long," Joshua said. "She told me, she said." He swallowed again, recrossed his legs. "That woman she."

Clegg's hands were ice. He tucked them into his armpits.

Another light change. A definite flicker. Clegg looked at the chandelier, stared into its filaments as they burned electric orange, hoped to catch the moment they went dark again.

Joshua shuddered, breaking Clegg's concentration. He jumped to his feet. Looked at Clegg. Shook his hand.

"I have to go," Joshua said. He bumped into Darby as he hurried out. Water splashed onto the floor.

"What the?" Darby looked at Clegg.

He shrugged, partly to hide his own shivers. "I think we need a new advertising guy. Is it cold? What's the temperature?" He tucked his hands under his thighs to warm them.

She walked out to the thermostat. "Sixty-two. Why do you set it so low? It's not that warm outside."

"I didn't set it low," he said. He got up and looked at the thermostat's backlit screen. "It's not programmed for that low."

"Well, I didn't do it," said Darby.

"I wasn't accusing you." Clegg reprogrammed the thermostat.

Darby drew her hands into her sleeves. "It's like the temperature is still dropping." She walked back into the kitchen. "It's warmer in here," she called.

She came back in and stood over the table, moved some papers around. "I didn't like his ideas anyway," she said. "But he left his briefcase."

"We'll have to send it," Clegg said. "I don't think he's coming back for it."

Clegg glared at the light a long time, but it burned steady. Spots crossed his vision the whole evening.

Clegg searched for the smoked oysters. He moved food around puzzle-style, searching the back of the pantry. There wasn't much pantry to search. The oysters weren't anywhere.

Darby walked in. He pulled his head out of the pantry.

She looked at the kitchen and he saw it through her eyes, every cabinet and drawer open. He closed the few nearest him.

"Do you know where my smoked oysters are?" he asked.

"Honey, you know I don't eat those." She made a face and shut a cabinet door.

"I just bought them yesterday. You haven't seen them?"

She shook her head, closed doors on her way to him. Thumbs digging in, she rubbed his shoulders. "We've been so stressed," she said. "You must have eaten them and not remembered."

As she rubbed his back, he was suddenly suspicious. She hated his smoked oysters, hated the smell of them, hated the grease in the trashcan from the spent tin, hated his breath afterward. It would be easy for her to tip them into the trash that morning before it was collected. He bristled against her hands.

"You didn't throw them out?" he asked.

"Of course not," she said. "I'll go to the store and get more."

Maybe he was being ridiculous. He tried to relax again, but her massages hurt. He had to tense his muscles. "Have you noticed our food is disappearing faster?" he asked.

"We've been eating at home more." She jabbed knuckles into his shoulder muscle. He flinched and she continued. "It makes sense we're eating more groceries."

"Sometimes—" He hesitated, not sure how she'd take the next part. "Sometimes I find the food other places. Places it doesn't belong. Soup cans in the laundry room. And I haven't seen the granola bars today. I'll probably find them in the bushes."

"Maybe one of us is sleepwalking," she said. Her joke meant the conversation was over.

It wasn't just granola bars. Clegg noticed lots of things he didn't tell Darby. She would explain them away, and he, who would give anything to explain them away, wouldn't be convinced. He couldn't explain finding the milk in the guest shower, the butter in his sock drawer, the chicken he'd been marinating for dinner on the mantel. He found himself watching Darby, suspicious when he didn't know what she was up to. There could only be a couple explanations for what was happening in the house, and he knew which was easier for him to believe.

He tried to catch her planning something. Searched her desk for the missing yogurt. Followed her to the garage to make sure she didn't mess with the breaker box. Looked through her internet history. Watched her when she thought he was somewhere else. Sometimes he thought he saw a slow, strange grin. In the space of a blink it would be gone.

In the restaurant's warm fireplace glow, Clegg let himself relax. Across the table, Darby was Darby again, her smile the one he knew well, the conversation comfortable and familiar.

"How was the gym?" she asked, her daily question.

"Crowded," he said. "I had to wait on people hogging the weights."

"If the story about the house is true, there should be a home gym in the basement somewhere," she said. "Maybe you can use it when we clean the place out."

He shook his head and reached for her hand. She took it. "Maybe some of the weights, but the equipment will be so old," he said. "And it's probably rusting under a bunch of other trash."

She nodded. "It's a shame, all those things down there are probably ruined."

He smiled. "If not, we could set the world record for largest yard sale."

They finished dinner in the contented silence of people who've already said everything. On the way to the car, Clegg dragged his feet, not wanting to change the feeling in the restaurant for the feeling at home.

"By the way," Darby said, "that man came by today while you were gone." Her coat was too light for the chilly evening and she shivered as the breeze picked up.

"Which man?" Clegg unlocked her door and she got in.

"You know, the older guy who gave you crap about the sign."

Clegg's throat closed a little. "What did he want?"

She shrugged and hugged herself. "He was nice to me. He asked when we were opening. I said we didn't have a set date and he said good-bye and kept walking. He seems okay. He was probably just in a bad mood the day you met him."

As Clegg walked around to the driver's side, he had an urge to run across the open field next to the restaurant. To keep running until it felt like far enough. He got in the car and cranked up the heat.

They came home to trash. Strewn all over. It covered the floor with paper, egg shells, coffee grounds, unidentifiable liquids. The smell of it was awful and Clegg saw what he hoped were chicken trimmings mixed in with the rest.

Darby stood in the entry. Her nails dented the soft paint where one hand clutched the doorframe. The leftovers container balanced, precarious, in the other. Clegg felt anger, hot and kinetic. His blood rushed faster. His body radiated heat, warm to his own touch when he pressed a hand to his cheek. A rash grew on his face and chest. His head hummed.

He plowed into the kitchen. Trash formed hills around his ankles. He checked the kitchen windows. All locked. All intact. He checked the side door. Locked from inside. A knife in hand, he checked every room. Pulled back the shower curtain. Dropped down to check under the bed. Opened closets. Except the huge pile of trash downstairs, there was no sign anyone had broken in.

When he returned to the kitchen, Darby still stood at the edge of the mess. He pushed past her to check the front door.

He turned the lock. Pulled at the knob. Everything worked fine.

Darby hadn't moved, but her body slumped, her eyes blank. Clegg was afraid she would fall over. He picked her up the way he had before in lakes and swimming pools getting ready to toss her in. She didn't respond except to put her arm around his neck as he carried her over the garbage and set her on the couch.

"Who would do this?" Clegg barely made out the words, her whisper was so soft, but he would have understood without them. Her question was his own. He sat next to her and put his head in his hands. The mystery was personal. He would figure out who had gotten in and how, but he already had a pretty good idea.

"Pleated pants," he said.

"What?" Darby had a hand over her eyes, her dirty feet positioned away from the couch fabric.

"It was Pleated Pants," Clegg said. "That old guy that keeps coming over here."

Darby peered between her fingers. "Why would he do this?" She sat up. "And how? He's old. He looks frail."

Clegg shrugged. "He could've had help," he said. "Maybe this neighborhood is full of assholes."

She shook her head.

"Who else then?" Clegg tried to cover the annoyance he felt by slowing his words, but he could tell it didn't work.

She raised an eyebrow at him, then dropped her head.

"What?" he asked.

Her voice was even softer than before. "Maybe it was you," she said.

"You think I did this?" he asked. Her suspicion of him brought back his own suspicion.

"Well your reaction in the kitchen was a little much, wasn't it?" he said. He scooted away from her. "Like you knew what you were going to see when we opened the door?"

"You were quick to blame that man," she said.

"And you were quick to recover from your shock."

Darby made her way through the kitchen, picked out dry spots like far spaced stepping stones, left him to clean the mess.

Clegg wanted to leave it, to make her have to clean up, but he couldn't. The stench wafted into the living room and each wave made him feel sick. He snapped on plastic gloves and, holding his breath in stretches as long as possible, went to work.

Handfuls filled the trash bag, made it stand upright on its own. He worked fast. It was getting hard to hold his breath as long as he needed to. He wanted to be done, to wash the floor and himself, then go upstairs to roll toward his side of the bed.

When his eyes did focus he saw, half-buried under a pile of papers, a broken chandelier crystal. He picked it up to be sure, but he already knew it was from the one he'd replaced when they'd first moved in. He threw it back down. Next to it, a piece of shredded statement from his bank with the letters LE and half a G. Under that, a month-old magazine addressed to Darby.

It was their trash.

The circles they made around the house overlapped less and less. She would enter the kitchen, the living room, the bedroom as he walked out, like she was waiting for

him leave. When he tried to talk to her, the responses were monosyllabic and distant. She focused harder on her computer, spent more than the necessary time on promotional materials, hunched over her keyboard where he could never see her eyes except reflected in the blue glow of her screen.

Only at night, uncomfortable side by side in their narrow bed, did their circles meet, became tangent as she turned her way and he turned his. He listened for her breath to slow, to steady before he allowed himself sleep.

They stopped answering the door. Each time the bell rang, they retracted further into the house, peering out separate windows until the visitor left.

Inside, Clegg lived on edge waiting for the next thing. When it didn't come, the whirring inside him built into a hum, the hum into a scream. If he'd seen a plate fly across the room by itself, caught Darby tampering with the water pipes, seen a neighbor sneaking around the yard, any of those things would have been a relief. As it was he kept the panic in, let it gnaw in unseen places.

A slam and a scream downstairs. Clegg dropped his razor and ran down, shaving cream still covering his chin and the place between his nose and lips. He'd never heard Darby make that noise. He found her in front of the closed basement door, her face colorless, the laundry she'd been carrying scattered three feet any direction.

"What happened?"

Her expression hardened. She looked at him. "If that was you Clegg, it wasn't funny. Find something else to do if you're that bored."

The shaving cream dried, made his face itch. "If what was me?"

She sighed.

The impatient one she used with pushy telemarketers and rowdy children. "That trick with the door. Slamming it as I was walking by to make me jump."

The panicky feeling was back. "Me?" he said. "How would I open and slam the door from upstairs?"

Darby bent down, gathered the clothes into a pile. "You creep around the house enough, you've probably figured it out."

"Oh, okay." He yanked the door open. "Let's find my string then. It's time we cleaned this pit anyhow."

Only a narrow path led down the stairs. Junk towered on either side. Clegg took a few steps down and found a tangled mess of yarn.

"Is this it?" He tore it from its resting place and held it up. "Is this what I used?" He tossed it up the stairs. "Take a look. I bet that's what I used."

Darby looked down from the doorway, arms crossed, her frame blocking most of his light. He went down a few more steps and poked around in the shadows. When he turned, a stuffed rabbit flew by his head. Darby's smirk made him furious. He tossed junk out of the way, cleared a space next to the wall.

"Is the string here? I don't see it." He tossed items up the stairs. A hair dryer. A wreath. "Come on, you're the expert. What's going on? Where is it?"

"You probably have some mechanism worked out," Darby said. She moved the things Clegg threw, created a pile behind her in the doorway. "That's why you've been following me around the house, acting weird. It was you all along."

Clegg heaved a chair up the stairs. "No, it was you all along," he said. "And then you blamed me."

He knocked over a stack of magazines. They slid over one another to the bottom landing. "You bitch."

Darby dragged the chair behind her and threw a thick bundle of pencils at him. She had a good arm and he knew she didn't mean to miss. It glanced off his jaw. He felt scratches form when the sharpened tips scraped across his skin.

He reached for anything. The hardest, heaviest thing he could find, but her face stopped him. Her mouth was open. Her tongue made soft clicking noises. Her eyes were wide. Focused somewhere behind him. He turned.

The woman at the bottom of the stairs was ash colored, her skin all but translucent. Veins and bones clearly visible. Her hair a rat's nest of snarls and knots. Dark circles around her black eyes. She studied Clegg and Darby. Her horrible smile full of pointy yellow teeth. When she spoke, her voice was gravel, the strain of muscles that hadn't moved in far too long.

"Look at you two." Her smiled widened, seemed to stretch the boundaries of her face. "Scared yourselves, didn't ya?"

CHAPTER 10

THE GREAT BIKE RACE

Three men and a sow on a sweltering July night. The only fan, a small thing moving miniscule amounts of air, points down at the sow in her nest. Mike stands by as his brother Jim rubs the pig, tries to keep her relaxed, calm. She has always been panicky, tried to eat her babies in previous litters. Mike will need to grab the piglets as they arrive, move them to a safe place until she calms down. He rubs the tight skin at the end of his right arm with his remaining left hand. He imagines a piglet slipping from his one-handed grasp, crashing to the floor, its tiny slick body going limp. His brother's fury, a paycheck lost. He tenses, feels guilt for the thing that hasn't happened.

The first piglet comes, a flurry of motion as the sow makes a siren noise and tries to stand. Mike rushes forward, scoops it up, no time to think about logistics. He steadies its tiny frame with the stump of his right arm. Out of the sow's crate, away from her gnashing teeth, her wild eyes. Mike sets the piglet down and it feels stiff, unnatural in his hands. A moment of panic, a flood of thoughts. What did he do wrong what will he tell Jim what could he have done. All the ways the piglet's death could be his fault. Its still-closed eyes seem more translucent than a moment before and he draws in a breath to tell his brother. Then he sees the tiny nose twitch, the mouth move in search of food, and he breathes out his relief.

After a couple hours and only a few more piglets, Jim's hands move slower on the sow. Rhythmic squeals, high-pitched to the point of headache, keep her agitated. She kicks her legs and tries to roll. The hair that covers Jim's arms is matted with sweat and he's stopped trying to wipe his face. Mike sits in a chair, waiting for the next, itchy from the sweat running down his back.

The pregnancy took them by surprise, and Mike knows Jim isn't happy to deal with her, so late in the season and such an old sow. Jim thought she was past her breeding years. When she got big, he was trying to pawn her off on a man he lived neighbor to. Mike heard his brother's "Goddammit!" across the pasture.

Jim is hunched, his eyes blurred. He's entered a trance, his head dropping and jerking up.

"I can do that for a while," Mike said.

Jim's torso shoots up straight and the sow, startled, lets out a monster squeal and tries to jump. For a second, Jim looks surprised to see Mike. Then he shakes his head and pushes the sow back down, slow, petting her into calm. "This animal's over three hundred pounds," he says. "If she starts throwing her weight around, you're screwed."

Like Jim, Mike has been around animals his whole life. He sees Jim glance down at his bad arm, as if by looking real quick Mike won't see. So Mike only says, "If you're sure." When Jim nods, he shifts, uncomfortable in his chair.

"I'll handle it," says Jim.

Cate was crying. Mike tried to put his arm around her and she scooted away, violent, sobbed harder into her cupped hands.

He twisted his wedding ring between his right thumb and middle finger.

He almost took it off, decided it was better to keep it on.

"I'm sorry," he said. There was nothing else to say. He'd fallen for Sarah, had acted on it, had known he'd feel the double guilt of it, the doing and the lying, until he told Cate. When he told her, he expected to feel lighter. The heaviness took him by surprise. He floundered, tried to find the words that would make him feel better.

"Cate," he said. "You know I'd give anything for you." The weight shifted in his chest, dissipated as her weeping stopped.

She looked up, tears and snot streaming down her face. "Prove it," she said. She took his right hand in hers. Her eyes were a wreck, swollen almost shut, the blood vessels beneath burst into wide red bars. Battered by something he'd done, something he should have been able to prevent. If she had asked, he'd have given her his other hand too.

They've been with the sow for hours when Maurice comes in. He takes one look at Jim and nudges him from beside the mother. Maurice puts his fingers on her belly, her legs, her neck, as if looking for a lifeline or an object he's lost. He finds a spot and rubs in wide circles, keeps going for the next hour until the last four are born. Mike picks them up, careful, careful, as they arrive, and moves them next to their siblings.

It's over. Pigs and men rest. Jim swigs his beer and bobs his head up and down. "That's how it's done," he says, voice low. He points his head at Maurice. "That is how it's done." He looks at Mike and swigs again.

Mike is stung. Maurice hasn't been around long. Before partnering with Jim he made a living as a performer in sparkly suits and dance shoes. Mike finishes his beer and belches loud enough the sow stirs in her sleep. The other two men look at him and he

turns to the crate. His fear is real, he's woken her. She grunts, but stays still, the previous spooked fire gone.

Jim and Maurice shake their heads at Mike, set down their beers.

"Let's move them, then," says Jim.

They set the piglets next to their mother, wait to see if she'll let them near. She snorts and her head moves in small motions on the floor, doesn't cause any trouble as her babies mill around her.

One is much smaller than the rest, and Mike rubs his bad arm, thinking how it will have to struggle against the others to eat enough that it can live. He picks it up and touches its tiny snout. Its hungry mouth tries to close around his finger.

He takes it to its mother. She won't let it feed, tries to kick at it every time he brings it close. He waits until some of the other piglets are full and tries again. Somehow, he thinks it will be his fault if the piglet doesn't eat. The sow kicks at the runt, makes an aggressive snorting noise.

"Watch out," Jim says, and Mike knows he's thinking of the hand, feels guilty that his severed limb might be the reason the piglet starves. The sow rears back and rather than drop the tiny warm body, he pulls away.

He tries to hand it to Jim, for him to try, but Jim shrugs. "Leave it in there. She'll either come around and let it feed or take care of it herself." He leaves the barn, and Mike knows he and Maurice are supposed to follow. He still holds the pig, but he can't feel it in his arms. His skin is numb as he follows the two men outside.

He walks to the hill away from Jim and Maurice. It's his parents' land and he knows it well. For the first time in years, when he looks down, it's on purpose. It's been

decades since they found Marion Wade in the ditch he and his brother burned, but the feeling, the gnawing guilty friction, is still like new. Through his thoughts, he feels his grip slack, the piglet slip, and he catches himself just in time. He looks away, takes a few deep breaths. He hasn't noticed Maurice's hand is on his shoulder.

"Goat milk will work. There's some in the barn," Maurice says. Then he's gone.

Mike dips the runt's snout in a saucer of warm goat milk every two hours. Multiple times, he almost falls asleep in the chair, but he stays. He wills the piglet to live.

It wasn't just the hand. He couldn't hang wallpaper anymore, couldn't even spackle fast enough. He sold his car to make a couple house payments.

When Sarah reached for something and fell off a stool in the office, he moved to catch her, but forgot to make up for his missing grasp. She slipped past his forearm, landed hard on the floor. He offered to get her crock pot down from the tallest cabinet. The lid crashed to the floor, broken. He watched as Sarah cleaned up the glass shards and made a foil cover for the pot. When he tried to help, she shooed him away.

"You'll cut yourself," she said.

She opened doors for him, buttoned his shirts, served up his dinners. Things he could do himself, things he let her do because it was quicker, easier. She drove him around, to work, to hang out with friends, to buy new socks.

One day while she was gone and he was bored, he pulled his old bicycle out of the garage, touched the handlebar with his forearm. When he was a kid he rode no-hands on the gravel. He climbed on. It made him feel better he could still ride, not well, but well enough.

Maurice calls as Mike steps out of the shower. He picks up the phone, his hand still wet. When he sees it's Maurice, he puts it to his ear, worried. When Mike needs to eat and sleep, Maurice watches the piglet, but their agreement is a silent one, Maurice showing up that first dawn, taking over. Mike riding home on his bike, getting back to the barn as soon as he could.

"Jim's gonna kill that runt pig," Maurice says before Mike even speaks. "I got here and he said he was, soon as he's done with breakfast. Thought you should know." And he hangs up.

"I'll be there," Mike says to the empty line.

As he throws on his clothes, he decides to bring the pig home. Maurice did the same for a runt goat his first spring with Jim. For all Mike knows it's still living in Maurice's house in one of the town's premier subdivisions and no one is the wiser.

Mike speeds out of his subdivision on the bike. He takes corners too fast and feels himself almost dump into the pavement. He grips the left handlebar, keeps his arm steady on the right, and goes on. He's usually more careful, still an unsteady rider as he relearns balance, tension, control. But his heart pounds in his legs and he urges the bike faster to the farm on the other edge of town.

Already it's eighty degrees. Sweat drips down Mike's calf as he swings onto Vine. Sweat collects under his left hand knuckles, and, impossible, he swears he can feel it under his right hand. He wonders if it's getting warm and damp wherever it is, just like the rest of him, still connected in some bizarre phantom way. It hasn't been too long yet. Long enough for him to learn to tie his shoes, answer the phone, open a can. Long enough for Sarah to decide she didn't want a man with only one hand. Recent enough

that the healing skin across the end of his arm itches in the heat to the point of pain. Recent enough that he still misses her.

Vine is a wide, busy street and he is prepared for morning traffic, but there are only a few cars. He hunches over his handlebars. It's a straight shot down Vine across Main Street to the highway and out of town.

When they were kids, Mike and Jim would shoot trash into the Wade's field, sometimes landing heavier objects like pop bottles all the way to their front yard. Watching trash stay airborne for the half mile to the Wade's was their entertainment, but Mike was sure Mr. Wade could see it too, the dark object against the blue sky, casting its shadow on the crops like a bird. Each time Mr. Wade pulled up to their house in his faded blue pickup, Mike ran upstairs and slid under his parents' high bed. The register underneath was an open grate, and from above Mike could see the kitchen table. The butter dish and the edge of a saltcellar. He pressed his face to the metal and listened.

"I'm sorry, Russell, I'll talk to the boys," his mother said.

"Actually, it's not about that today. Have you seen my wife by chance?" Russell's voice sounded weaker than usual. "She went for a walk and I haven't seen her."

The kitchen clock made duck calls on the hour, and it whistled six.

"I haven't," said Mike's mother. "I'll let you know if do."

Mike heard the front door close behind Russell, saw his mother sit down at the table, heard her sigh. He didn't know why, but he could feel a heavy drumbeat in his stomach. His insides went slick. He stayed under the bed, watched from above as his family passed peas and chicken.

His mother asked Jim if he'd seen Mike. Jim shrugged and stabbed a chicken breast with his fork.

With the long stretch of pavement in front of him and Main Street not even in sight, Mike realizes how far he has to go and wishes he still had his car. Losing his hand put him out of work until Jim gave him the farm job, and he'd had to sell the car to make the house payment. He doesn't mind riding his bike places. He hitches rides to Des Moines with friends, drives his mom's car to doctor's appointments, does a lot of mail ordering. Today is the first time in a long while he'd been in a hurry. He searches passing cars for a familiar face, someone to hear his story and give him a lift. Four cars pass and he sees the woman who sometimes checks his groceries at Fareway. He feels uncomfortable reaching toward her car, but manages to knock on her back bumper before she gets away. She keeps moving and his mood sinks thinking she didn't hear. But then the car slows, stops, and he pulls up to her passenger side. With a whir, the window moves down. A blast of cold air whooshes out and hits his face. He leans in closer.

"What?" She's young, the checkout woman, younger than Mike by about twenty years. And she looks annoyed, her nails tapping against the snakeskin-covered steering wheel.

He smiles, hoped it will make her smile too. It doesn't.

He drops the corners of his mouth. "I need some help."

The young woman stares at him, her nails no longer tapping. She ignores the question. "I know you," she says. "You come in the store sometimes."

He nods, glad she recognizes him. She's always friendly in the store, smiling and asking questions about his groceries, the difference between grape and cherry tomatoes.

"And you're trying to get across town?" she asks. "Right now?"

He nods again, feels bad for slowing her down, taking up her time. He can see from her wrinkled brow and her jiggling leg she isn't interested. He explains the pig.

"Please," he says. "I'll wrap the it in my shirt. It won't get your car dirty. Whatever it is, I don't have much time."

"I'm sorry," she says. "I'm afraid I don't either. Not enough anyway. Good luck with your pig." She rolls up her window and is gone.

Mike went over to his parents' farm one night with a six-pack. The gravel drive needed a grader. His frame jolted with every patch of loose rock. The weather had been dry and his tires kicked dust onto his pant legs. Jim stood on the porch, raised his hand in greeting. He had a way of always being outside when someone arrived, like he knew they were coming. He knocked a stack of newspapers off the second chair.

Mike walked up and put the beer between them without a word. He had two for courage and asked for a job.

"You want to work here?" Jim said. He gestured to the land, but his hands pointed at the valley below, at the Wade's farm Mike could never look directly toward. Mike opened another beer and put his head down.

"I can still do farm work," he said. He knew that wasn't the only reason Jim asked. Where he wouldn't look, Jim spent hours staring down at the Wades', his expression blank, his eyes distant. Even though someone else lived there, it was still the Wades' to them.

"If you think you're up for it," said Jim, "That's what brothers are supposed to do. You need a job, so there it is."

Mike nodded. There it was.

He keeps looking in cars that pass but doesn't know anyone. As he speeds forward, he thinks about the pig, how to keep it in the house. Baby pigs are fragile, especially one whose mother won't let it feed. He makes a mental list of the things he'll need and almost slams into the back of a stopped SUV. His blurred eyes catch its red taillights and he screeches his thin tires.

They're a good three hundred feet from where the intersection would be if Mike could see that far ahead. The reverse lights come on and the driver honks, light, for Mike to back up.

"What the hell." Mike shakes his head at the driver. He backs his bike to the curb and sees Main Street as the SUV turns around.

The street is full of cyclists, riding the same direction in both lanes. Spandex shorts, bright-colored tops. Some ride slower than the others and Mike watches one frustrated man jumped the curb to pass what looks like a grandma-grandson pair on the sidewalk, almost mowing down two women watching in front of a store.

"Shit," he says, the word just audible. They come every year, through towns across Iowa, it's Madison's turn. Mike knows thousands of bicycles are coming through. He walks his bike to the intersection. Maybe the end is close. The river of cyclists continues as far as he can see. As impenetrable as a train going across a road. Overseen by dozens of policeman.

Strange for the sheer number of people, little noise comes from the scene. Only the soft whir of pedals, the occasional shout somewhere farther up or back in the current, the collective panting of those less prepared to ride miles in the July heat.

He can join them, he thinks. Ride the stream up and make his way across. Turn off for the highway. And maybe on a more open road he could, but even though the hushed procession of riders seems orderly from a distance, Mike is looking into chaos.

A man rides near, pedaling harder than he has to. Thick legs pump against bright purple spandex. Mike can feel the air moving from his exertion. Heart pumping, Mike waits for him to pass, then tries to dart in behind two women. In his rush, he comes too close to one and she shouts, raises her middle finger. Mike wobbles and his front wheel shifts out of control. Before he topples, he catches himself. Plants a foot on the ground and tightens his left hand grip. He backs away from the surge, looks up ahead. The flow of bicyclists goes straight to the horizon. He has to go around.

Mike was surprised when Maurice started working with Jim on the Franklin's farm.

"Jim," he said his first day, gesturing to Maurice's vehicle coming up the drive. "Look who it is."

Jim's gaze drifted toward the truck parking next to his, both red and rusty. "I know. He works with me." Jim went to help Maurice get a wire spool out of the bed.

Maurice Henby had always been Joshua's Wade's best friend. After his mother's death, when Joshua ignored Mike and Jim in school, Maurice ignored them too. Mike had kept his distance from them and the places they went, unable to stay calm knowing they were judging him across the room.

Mike mentioned something about it eventually, asked how Joshua was doing while Maurice worked on the tractor battery. Jim gave him a look he'd never seen before, and Mike excused himself to get water. Later he heard Joshua was the one caused

trouble with Maurice's wife, and they made a relationship based on shared pity. Mike had heard about Heather, felt bad for what she'd done to Maurice. He turned into someone no one recognized when she left, and when his daughter did too, he could have retired, but instead he started his new life with Jim on the farm.

A few times, while he was pitching hay or pouring oats, Mike caught Maurice watching the end of his arm work. When Mike met his eye, Maurice smiled thin and went back to his own business. You poor bastard, Mike thought, don't pretend you're any better off.

Mike rides furious, retraces his path on Vine and turns across six parallel streets and onto the seventh. But even as he does he can see the bright colors, the stream of spokes and helmets and gloves on handlebars.

He pedals a dozen more blocks before he whips around a corner and down a side street. The pavement slopes down fast then rises into one of the steepest hills in Madison. Hills are hard, but he knows the street will eventually wind back to the thinner part of Main. He's never even seen a parade up that far, and they snake all over town, trapping people on one side or the other for hours.

He has to stand on the bike to get enough power to pull the hill and halfway up, he loses momentum, has to walk his bike to the top. He rides the curve around, nearly squashed by a car as it blows a stop sign and emerges from behind a huge oak tree. The driver honks long and obnoxious, and Mike takes his good hand from the bar long enough to respond.

The road is pretty, large overhanging trees and drives leading to houses with gardens out front. A woman stands in one and waves to Mike. He nods as he speeds

past. Then the scenery tapers off. A few more streetlights, a few more stop signs. He looks left, right at each and blows through. He doesn't have time to stop.

Up ahead, Main Street. And there they are again. Mike stops in the middle of the road. Brings his hands down on his thighs. He can't believe it. Bikes trickle through the thin road, going slow as their traffic bottlenecks. The police have barricaded the intersection with ugly orange and white boards. One of them stands by, watching the onlookers and riders. His sweaty forehead shines and Mike notices the sun is climbing. He feels time running out and panic rising. He breathes all the way out, tries to slow his heart. At least downhill will be easier.

As he turns to go, he sees a little boy staring at him. His father is watching the cyclists, and the boy tugs on his arm, points at Mike. Mike knows what he wants his dad to see. The boy's finger is in his mouth, forgotten. Mike puts his own finger in his mouth and shakes his severed arm at the little boy who jumps to hide behind his father. Mike rolls his eyes, picks up his bike, and turns away.

Riding parallel to Main, he can see the cyclists down every street he passes. He goes more blocks and they're still there, riding the slow pace of people who don't have any particular place to be.

Main isn't going to work. He will have to make a big loop, go all the way around.

He thought giving up his hand would grant him peace, but it only gave him Sarah and then not even her, and he found new places for the blame.

He watched from the couch as Sarah packed the last of her belongings, the boxes piled in their small living room. He hadn't helped much, afraid his missing hand would cause trouble, afraid he would ruin something else before she was gone.

He hugged her goodbye, and noticed she leaned away. How awkward, his forearm tapping against her back.

After he left he sat on their bed, watched the wallpaper flap under the ceiling fan, the bad job he'd done when he believed he could work one-handed.

He called her when Jim gave him the job at the farm.

"You can't stand that place," she said. She knew that much, but he'd never told her exactly why. The pain of it was too much to say out loud.

"It's a job," he said. "I need a job."

"That's your fault." Her voice had a hard edge. "You didn't lose your hand. You gave it to her." She never would speak Cate's name. He could by her flattened consonants she had the edge of a fingernail between her teeth.

"That was the deal," he said. "The only way you and I could—" He stopped. They'd had the conversation too many times. He glanced at the shiny skin stretched over the end of his arm bone.

She was silent then, the silence of every time they talked about his hand. You're the reason, he was going to say. I wanted to be with you, and that's the reason it's gone. But that wasn't the whole truth. It was also a penance. For things he'd done. Instead, he waited out her quiet.

"It's your parents' farm," she said finally. "He's your brother. Was he going to say no?"

Mike hung up, then was sorry for it. Fought the urge to call her back. But she was wrong. Jim would say no, almost did say no.

Mike rides zigzag through neighborhoods and interior streets.

Bounces hard over buckled pavement in less-kept areas. Close growing trees shadd the sun and the breeze he creates by riding fast cools him. He comes out of the trees into a new development, the dirt lots at the end of roads waiting for construction, basketball hoops standing alone in cul-de-sacs. He rides hard and fast until he's nearly lost in suburban hell, the houses all the same in three different colors, the roads with the same names Oak Road, Oak Drive, Oak Circle turning back on themselves, running into each other, and no oak tree in sight. He passes the same blue house with a noisy small dog on a leash three times before the road widens and dumped him out far away from Main, down in the industrial side of town, one street from the highway.

There they are, the cyclists. Mike can see distant cars zip by on the highway, free on the right side of the bike parade. Reflectors shine in the late morning sun as the riders take their time with the day's miles. Mike resents them, how carefree they are to take a week from their lives and just pedal. They are riding toward free beer gardens and naked pond diving. He thinks about joining them. Riding off across the state with fifteen thousand other strangers, riding until his butt hurts and he can smell himself and his legs might give out. He could wait for the end of the line, join the stragglers in the back. Ride away from his parents' farm and Sarah and Cate. Away from the things that had happened, that he'd allowed to happen. From the pig. But he won't. He knows he can't ride away from the one thing he'd like to. Himself.

Their mother gave then ten bucks each to burn the ditch. They went down with shovels and a sprayer of diesel. The weeds had grown out of the ditch and as high as Mike's small chest. If he'd stood at the bottom, they would have been two, three times his height. He wasn't supposed to go down when the ditch was overgrown because all

sorts of things could be living in the tall weeds, but he did anyway once and watched the world from the bottom. Down there everything was still except the now and then rustling of something moving in the grass. Above, the clouds, birds, cars on the road, the world moved by without him.

Mike wanted to spray the diesel, throw the matches, but Jim said he was too little so he stood by with a shovel in case the fire went someplace it shouldn't.

"It smells funny," Mike said after a couple minutes.

"Smells like diesel," said Jim.

Mike shook his head. "No, not that. Like the time Dad left the gas on too long and the heater blew up and his eyebrows burned off."

Jim sniffed. "I smell it a little," he said. "Sometimes animals die down there."

Mike's eyes widened. He went as close to the burning edge as he could, looked down into the flames.

Jim saw. "Don't worry. The live ones get away." He kept spraying, throwing matches.

Then all the weeds were gone and the ditch bottom was an ashy pile.

That day burning the ditch, that death smell, he thought it was a pig. The irony makes him smile grim into the cyclist stream. It will be hours still before they clear out. Everywhere he tries to go, they will be there. He considers turning back home and feels a deep stab in his chest. His stomach goes slick again. No, he has to save the pig.

He tenses his left-hand knuckles, braces his right arm, gets his balance. A group comes, riding four across and he sees his moment. Kicking his pedals into motion, he darts in front, swerves away from a dropped water bottle, keeps moving as the other

cyclists curse and shout and put their feet down to stop, their handbrakes forgotten. The bike ride comes to a stop. Cyclists bunch up, spin into lawns, ride into parking lots to avoid each other. Knees scrape against pedals, handlebars dig into ribs, tires run over feet.

Their noise explodes behind him. Mike's conscience doesn't even prick. "Hey!" someone calls out, meant for him. He never slows. He hits the other side of the street and keeps pumping, knees to his arms, chin in the air. The open road is in front of him. His hair, sticky against his forehead, dries as the wind blows through. Ahead is the highway, the past, a chance.

CHAPTER 11

TOUR OF HOMES

The public is never invited. Although the residents of Cardinal Flatts subdivision have sales every summer Saturday, none of them put ads in the local paper or posters on electrical poles. Neighborhood sales are for the neighborhood. Residents wait their turn in the sales rotation, then take their items and put them on a table or two in their garage or yard. All sales begin at six Saturday morning, when the street is blocked off to outsiders by tape and a police car, and end at five when both tape and police are removed. During those hours, a handful of neighbors wander around the two or three sales going on, but rarely buy anything. Sellers sit out in lawn chairs with fans and water, hoping someone will buy what they've set out.

They're called junk sales, because that's how they began. But there have been no Little Golden Books or electric toothbrush bases or the other typical cheap yard sale items since the very first one. Now it's the same jewelry, antique furniture, paintings, and strange knickknacks sold and resold and appraised and reappraised so much that everyone knows just how much they're worth, which is not nothing but is never as much as the outrageous prices.

Some people, although they'll never admit it, keep the tables in set up in their garage, ready for their next turn. Others, though they won't admit it either, buy new

things to resell when it's their turn, trying to trick a neighbor into thinking they've found a deal.

Still nobody passes up their turn to have one. Nobody except two, and one is Renee Stringfellow. She has never had a yard sale, but she attends everyone else's. Anymore she is often the day's only buyer. At one point, Renee was an interior designer. Or had been about to be one, until she dropped out of college her senior year to backpack Europe. She still considers herself a decorator, her specialty living rooms, and she goes to the junk sales to select props for remodeling her house.

Some items get haggled back and forth all the time. Renee leaves those alone. They are the utilitarian items, highly impersonal, needed only once in a while, like ice cream machines, double tall ladders, pressure washers, and patio heaters. She looks for furnishings: cabinets and vases and art. She pays whatever price her neighbors ask and when she's done, she goes home to arrange her finds.

When she still had a family, Renee would redecorate her house four times a year so that no season ever looked similar to the ones around it, and no season looked the same from year to year. Her current project is much bigger. With her kids off in different corners of the United States and her husband remarried to a stocky barista with no sex appeal as far as Renee can see, she had to choose a large project to fill her time. Like those seasonal redecoratings, this project never has to end. There is one room still blank. Painted a white base and empty except for a ceiling fan, and it bothers her. She wants each of the rooms to at least have a start, and she's hoping today's sale will fix that.

Each family's sale has an unintended theme. Industrial steel and gray for the Deans. Simple inspirational quotes like "Love" and "Family" on everything that belongs to the Goddards. Americana for the Millers. American flags on everything. American flags and denim. On buckets, on wreaths, antique sleds, rugs meant to be hung on walls. One whole room in Renee's house is dedicated to the Americana items she's bought from them. The old repainted barn door table is in the middle of the room and the rusty metal star wreath hangs on the immediate wall when you walk in. Flush against the ceiling a wallpaper border wraps all the way around the room, American flags inside stars of all sizes.

Emily Patterson, who lived for a while in Florida, keeps a lot of beach-themed decorations to remind her of a place that isn't seventeen hours from the nearest ocean. At one of Emily's sales, Renee buys a sea sponge, and Emily explains for several minutes the best way to display it for decoration. When Renee gets home she paints a stark white base over the burnt orange he picked out when they bought the place. She dips the sponge that Emily claimed to have harvested herself from the Florida Gulf into a gray gravy-thick paint and pushes it against the wall over and over until the sponge and room are covered.

When she's done, she has a sense of being under water, or maybe very close to a large furry animal. It seems appropriate that the room have some calm after fifteen years served as practice space for her husband's awful heavy metal band. She tries to patch the hole in the wall, but can't get it to look right. She places a picture of the Pattersons there instead, one she found behind the cardboard in the frame. Overhead, Renee hangs a

black wrought iron chandelier and positions three triangular mirrors to reflect its light, all from the Patterson's sales.

Renee Stringfellow is recreating her neighbor's living rooms. She calls it art. She has no one to call it anything else. One by one, she visits her neighbors' sales, bought their furnishings, and created if not an exact replica, then a better, more concentrated version of the family's tastes and lifestyle in the form of a living room. She tries to use at least ninety percent of the family's own belongings. As she adds to her project, she's come to the point in many rooms where the only thing she can do is make them look more lived-in: books on the floor, new issues of magazines on coffee tables, rumpled blankets on couches. No one knows about her project. They probably assume she's reselling the stuff.

She has been in and reproduced every living room in Cardinal Flatts except the one she is about to see. Her fingertips tingle as she approaches 107 Cardinal Boulevard. She puts on lipstick to give her hands something to do as she stands outside on the sidewalk, waiting for the front door to open. So far, she's the only one there but she knows that will change. These will be the first new goods to hit the neighborhood market in months, and she's ready to fight for them.

Marigold Rubin was a gaudy woman. She lived on the only true corner lot in Cardinal Flatts and commandeered the public space behind her house as an extension of her own backyard by filling it with gnomes. These gnomes were world travelers, each a stereotype of the country he represented. The Scottish one wore a kilt. The Italian was midstir in a huge pot of pasta. The Australian was riding a kangaroo. No one knew where she found them or if she had them custom made.

But most evenings the neighborhood could see her standing in her yard looking out at her ceramic world garden.

The day of that first sale, Marigold went down to the Patterson's in a purple sequin tank top and blue tie-dye jeans, her arm fat quivering under her heavy canvas shopping bag, although the rest of her was slim. She'd come for a haul. She perused the collection of tables, picking up items and putting them back down, until she came to the cat purse.

The business end of the handbag was the cat's head, and a flap that made up the ears and nose had to lift if anything was taken out or put in. Marigold rooted around inside, almost like she knew she would come out with the ring. The diamond was small, but it sparkled in the late morning sun.

Marigold tried to hide it. She stuffed it back in almost as soon as she pulled it out. But Renee had seen it. She'd seen Marigold's small gasp as she pulled the ring out and knew it was no costume jewelry. She trotted over to the table where Marigold was standing.

"What you got there?" she asked.

"Nothing," said Marigold. She squeezed the purse shut in her palm.

"You found something good?" someone else asked.

"What did you find?" asked Renee.

Soon a large crowd gathered around Marigold, all leaning too close, all peering at the clump of synthetic fur in her hand. She tucked the purse up under her armpit as Renee snatched for it. When Renee's hand fell away, a fresh red scratch had travelled down Marigold's arm into the valley of her armpit. Both women stared at the wound.

"You should give it back," Renee said, wrenching her eyes from the scratch. She glanced over at Emily Patterson who, oblivious to the whole ordeal, was haggling with someone over her late great aunt's redchecked tablecloth. "She probably didn't know that was in there."

"I really don't know what you're talking about," said Marigold. The shape of her fist pressed against the purse's fur exterior.

"She wouldn't mean to sell that for so little," said Renee. "Be a good neighbor and put it back."

Marigold just smiled. After a moment, she pushed through the crowd and up to Emily at the makeshift cash register.

"What did she find?" someone asked as Marigold waved good-bye for the last time. The next week she would have moved out of her large corner house, destination unknown, missing the craze her find started.

Renee considered. She stayed quiet so long the women protested, prodding her to tell them already.

"What's more valuable than a diamond?" she finally said.

The women didn't respond, but each clearly formed an answer of her own. They stared at each other, then took off across the tables, fighting each other for any item that might contain something else: boxes, inkwells, trunks, folded scarves, purses, old shoes.

Renee examined their clothes. The just-so positioning of Stacey Miller's hair clip had been knocked sideways, Anne Prough's starched shirt was crumpled, Lisa Caley had grass stains on her cuffs. Renee thought of all the times she'd been to these women's houses. How prim and settled they'd seemed then. Surefooted and satisfied next to their

well-washed children and their hardworking husbands. Nothing like these women shoving and tearing hair on Emily's front lawn, fighting and searching for a non-existent object.

As she looked around at the various items, it occurred to her she could capture these women's complexities. And she could start with Emily Patterson. She tucked a pink conch shell sitting nearby under her arm and left. It didn't matter that it had belonged to Emily's aunt. It reminded Renee of Emily and that was enough to get her started.

There would be time to collect the items she needed. She knew now that her neighbors were looking for their own specific brand of treasure, the sales wouldn't end any time soon.

Her project started the night of the Marigold incident in a sketchbook. She sketched the conch shell first, feeling its curves and shadows. Renee closed her eyes and concentrated. She traced four walls and a set of French doors leading in and out of the room. Two couches made a right angle under her pencil, and a dark round table formed equidistant in front of them. She drew a taller table, the same color but smaller in diameter, behind the two couches. On the table she drew a lamp and the seashell picture. She sketched billowing lightweight curtains and a vase with coral inside. She knew the room. It was easy to recreate in her mind. She opened her eyes and slid her notebook underneath her bed where she had been working.

Everyone is turning out for the sale today. She searches for someone, then turns forward. A crowd gathers around Renee, takes up the sidewalk and the grass on either side. In big groups, more neighbors plod across the lawn, hoping to find treasure for five

or ten bucks. Some stand in the street. Some press closer than she finds comfortable, but no one stands in front of her. No one becomes foremost in the crowd.

Renee senses turning heads, squinting eyes, her neighbors sizing each other up, but she keeps forward. A large man sighs in her ear. Renee keeps focused. Someone gives her a light accidental jostle from behind. Renee keeps focused. She wants to see the door open, as if seeing that guarantees she will be the first one in.

The estate sale was supposed to start at eight am. Renee checks her watch. Eighty thirty. She's been standing for forty-five minutes and her feet are bothering her. She shifts her weight, and slips her left foot out to rub the arch against her other leg, but she keeps her eyes on the Henby House.

Behind the thin full-length window curtain, she sees movement and the crowd tenses with her. Everyone is prepping, like a mob on Black Friday.

In creating the rooms, sometimes Renee starts from an object or group of objects. Other times, it's a color scheme or a layout. She likes to sit on what used to be Mr. James's green couch while she works. The way the velour moves under her fingertips to make different shades of the same color amuses her, and she imagines Mr. James must have done the same when the couch was in his house. She loves that with the swing of a door, she can be in his living room at the furthest point of the neighborhood.

Mr. James is tall, and he leaves the house in gym shorts at about five o'clock each evening. He's about half Renee's age, and the way she feels watching him come and go in his black sports car is probably inappropriate. When she saw the couch for sale, she made her bedroom into his living room the same day. Now there's also a heirloom sewing machine—she likes to think it's his great grandma's—in constant sight as she

draws new details for her sketches. On paper, she repositions the sewing machine slightly on its ornate wood table, which she used to see in Mr. James's entryway on her rare visits to drop off some baked goods or ask for a hammer. Then she moves the sewing machine in the actual room.

Since she's been in all the living rooms, it's easy to do the sketches. Most often, though, she has to rely on memory, and hers is slipping a little. Slowly the sketches become her memory when she goes to make additions. Now, even though at sales her neighbors often don't remember what originally belonged to them, Renee knows exactly what used to belong to who.

Loud knocking interrupted Renee putting away groceries. The room had once been the kitchen with a table and four chairs and a growth chart. Now the Benson's home bar took over one corner, and Renee stocked her milk and vegetables in the mini fridge.

"Mrs. Stringfellow!" a small voice yelled from the front porch.

She ignored it just like the Girl Scouts and the mail carrier and the trick-or-treaters.

The knocking continued. "Are you in there, Mrs. Stringfellow?"

She put down a tub of cottage cheese and peered out the window. Tyler Prough stood outside, his jeans grass stained and his glasses on crooked.

"What are you selling, Tyler?" she asked through the door. "Some fundraiser for school?"

"No ma'am," he said, his mouth next to the door crack. I messed up and you're the only one who can help me."

"What did you do?" she asked.

"I sold my brother's microscope kit. Mom says you bought it. It's old and rickety. Do you know the one?"

Renee knew it. It had been the finishing touch to the Prough's room, much better than the copy of *Popular Science* that she had before. She was proud she had one room completed.

"Mrs. Stringfellow?"

She opened the door a crack.

"Oh hi," he said. "I'll return your money. I just really need it back."

"Well, Tyler—"

But he wasn't looking at her anymore. He stared past her.

"What happened to your entryway, Mrs. Stringfellow?" he asked.

Something bubbled inside her and she smiled, pushing the door all the way open.

"I redecorated it. Do you like it?"

Before the words were out, he was gone.

"Well, I think it's nice," she said.

Back inside, she dusted the microscope set and adjusted it on its shelf.

The front door of Maurice Henby's house swings open, slow and creaky like something out of a thriller. Renee's eyes narrow, try to see behind the maroon door with its large gold knocker.

A man steps out. He is short with a few wisps of gray hair combed over his shiny head. His wide eyes suggest that he is shocked at the size of the crowd outside. He stumbles a few times before he can manage his speech.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he says. "Thank you for your interest in the estate sale of Maurice Henby. We have taken the items left after the previous sale and collected them in Mr. Henby's living room."

The crowd murmurs. Renee lowers her eyebrows. She doesn't know about a previous sale. If she had known, she would have been there.

The discussion in the crowd gets louder, more heated. Renee presses forward with the crowd. Her palms sweat.

The short man speaks again.

"Mr. Henby, as you likely know, was a well, eccentric individual and over the years become something of a minimalist. Some say his wife—um, anyway, I'm afraid a great many items were claimed at the first sale. Still you might find something you like, so go on in."

The crowd stampedes forward. Some are knocked down and others move right over them. Fights break out. Men and women alike pull hair, shove, ram into each other with elbows and shoulders. A man's hand picks up a rock and throws it into the crowd.

Renee rushes through the door in front of the others. The first room she sees as she walks inside looks like a living room, but can't be the right place. Inside she sees only a painting and a goat tethered to a column. She moves to the next room.

"Please, ma'am," says the short thinning man. "The rest of the house is off-limits. Stay in the living room."

So this is it then. A painting and a goat.

She hates the painting. Disturbing, the subject's scratchy white frame, square legs and torso, lopsided breasts with square nipples, the dark Y formed by thighs and nether

region pointing the opposite direction of dopey animal eyes. She flips it over. Thin brown paper rustles under her fingers. She'll have to buy it now and figure it out the rest later.

"I'll take it," she tells the short man, holding up the painting so it faces him.

"Wait a minute!" someone shouts behind her. "Maybe I want it."

"She offered first," the short man says. He looks tired. Renee knows he won't enforce anything.

"Take the goat," Renee tells her neighbors coming in the door.

"No one wants that smelly goat," says Mr. James. He steps forward and eyes her painting.

"She offered first," the short man says, quieter this time. His face red.

She almost gives the painting to Mr. James. She doesn't like it anyway. She could use some space of her own, or now that Maurice is gone she could wait to see who moves in, or maybe it's time for a new project entirely or—

And the whole weight of the crowd is on her. Someone yanks the frame out of her hands, leaves splinters. Someone else tears off the brown paper backing. Mr. James pins her down so the others can search the painting for valuables. Hot anger wells in her chest and with a loud gurgling sound she works her dry mouth. The moisture comes slow but when she has a wad, she spits up and hits her target. Mr. James hurries out of the dog pile, wiping at his eye.

She still can't move. There are too many people fighting and smacking each other and pushing their fingers into the frame's crevices. Its paper covering is torn wide, flapping and ripping under their probing fingers. Renee calls out for them to stop, but no

one even hears her over the noise. Someone removes her shoe. She can't tell by accident or on purpose.

When they don't find anything but canvas and wood, they shift away, silent and slumped over. Renee stands up and holds the painting together the best she can. Her clothing is torn, her skin scratched, but she tends to the painting. The backing hangs on by an inch of paper, the wood frame is nicked and scratched, and the canvas itself is crumpled near the subject's head. She looks down at it.

"I'll still take it," she says, putting her shoe back on.

"Ma'am," says the short man. His downcast eyes look apologetic. His breath comes out in high-pitched wheezes. "The painting is a package deal."

She doesn't understand. She only looks at him. He gestures to the goat and wheezes again.

Renee has no use for a goat. It stares up at her with its sideways eyes, a piece of Maurice's carpet in its short blunt teeth.

But she's had enough trouble and the short man's wheezing suggests that he has too. She accepts the looped end of the blue canvas lead he holds out to her, and leads the goat home.

Renee already has brown paint she could use to cover Maurice's room. She pulls it out of the basement and sets it in the room before she lets herself plan anything else. She starts to dismantle certain rooms, but she puts everything back when she realizes what she's doing to her project. She sits on Mr. James's couch with her sketchbook and knows how strange that is, but she needs her routine to get this done.

She weighs her options.

She sketches out what Maurice Henby's living room may have looked like, keeping the brown color and the columns, adding leather couches and mahogany furniture. She sets exotic knickknacks on a fireplace, draws a shrunken head to amuse herself. While she examines her finished sketch, a strangled feeling beats around in her stomach. She's never had to buy so much outside the neighborhood to complete a room. She might as well scrap her whole project if she does that.

Goat bleats filter in from the front porch. She peers out. The goat chews at the leash keeping him next to the railing. For now, Renee decides, she'll recreate the living room as she saw it. Maurice was a minimalist, the man had said, and she can think of nothing more minimal than a painting and a goat in a brown columned room. She'll keep it that way until someone new moves into Maurice's house, or she can't stand the goat anymore, whichever comes first.

The pathetic bleating makes her head hurt. She unties the goat and leads him into his new space. She leaves the paint bucket in the room and goes to buy some decorative columns.

The house is quiet. That isn't odd. Renee has gotten used to the museum-like quiet of her house after living alone for almost a decade. Gone are the days of loud music thumping from upstairs and down. Renee moves the columns from her car to what used to be the entryway, now the Proughs' room. She sets them against the spot where the family photo used to hang.

She has the hovering sense that something is wrong. She heads for Maurice's room to set up the columns and start taping the floorboards for painting. The door is wide open. Before she left she could hear the bleating all over the house. The silence

she's come to cherish feels crushing. She freezes, listens for the tiniest sound that will tell her where to find the goat. Only deafening quiet.

She runs to her favorite room, partially because it is her favorite, but partially because she just knows. There she finds him, eating a huge chunk of Mr. James's couch. The green velour disappears down his gullet. A sad chewed up patch of yellowed foam dangles. She has heard that goats will eat anything, but she's always thought it was an exaggeration.

Her throat closes. She makes a little choking sound and runs her fingers over the mangled couch. Scattered all over the floor are little shreds of paper. She picks one up and sees half the Goddard's fish tank drawn in pencil. Her sketchbook, discarded now for tastier morsels, is in shreds under the couch.

Renee swings her leg back, prepared to kick as hard as possible. Images of cooked goat and goat fur rugs flash through her mind, and with those violent images comes one of Mr. James on top of her, angry and allowing the others to have their way with her painting.

She puts her leg down.

The goat stares up at her with its rectangular pupils and she swears it's smiling at her. The chew hole in the couch has an interesting pattern, if she looks at it the right way. She's seen art before by dogs and cats and dolphins and even elephants. And she's seen people pay money to own it. She and the goat regard each other in silence for a long time.

She feels the weight of her neighbors, making her the bottom of their dog pile in order to get what already belonged to her.

CHAPTER 12

THE ROOSTER CROWS AT NIGHT

Avis was known for her way with chickens. She knew everyone at the livestock auction expected her to bid on the cage of young Rhode Island Red hens she'd been standing next to all afternoon. Every so often she wandered out to the front of the arena where goats, pigs, cows, guineas, peacocks, and sheep were led or herded by men in blue flannel shirts and steel-toed boots. She wandered the stadium seating in front of the arena and watched the bidders' white cards flash in the air. But she always returned to the young chickens, clutching her own card, number 119, close to her stomach.

Young boys, the auctioneer's sons, spread fresh yellow hay over the cold dirt floor, dusty particles floated through the air, and the spicy smell of walking tacos mixed with the earthy dung dropping on the hay from a two-year-old Holstein.

A little girl hung from the bright red gate to the corral by her hands and feet, and let go with a yelp when her mother swatted her low-hanging behind.

Avis walked into the barn behind the arena and inspected the Rhode Islands closer. The cage was large for the five pullets, but still they climbed all over each other.

"They're energetic," Avis told the seller, whose lot badge just said Jim. "Good sign."

Jim leaned toward her, a little too close.

"I'd better get a good bit of money off them," he said. "I've been up since three, here since seven, and I'm not going home with no piece of shit fiver. There'll be hell to pay for that."

Avis pulled her head in, tucked chin to chest, and tried to smile. She fingered her bidding card.

Jim winked and cooled himself with a small electronic pocket fan. Avis wished he'd turn it on his pullets. Many of the animals, especially the birds, looked overheated in the steamy barn. The doors were wide open and large fans blew from every corner, but it wasn't enough. Avis mopped at her forehead with the red bandana she always brought to auctions.

Jim had an almost-empty bottle of tomato juice next to him. He shook it. The pasty red contents flopped around insdie. "Yup, been here since seven waiting my turn. This is my third juice today. Gonna have to get another."

He walked through the arena to the concession stand where the sign behind the counter said that stupid questions cost five dollars.

Avis, to pass the time, turned to the tall cage in another seller's lot. She locked eyes with a giant rooster. For an instant, his mottled orange irises made it impossible to look away. Avis never kept a rooster. They were territorial and aggressive, not to mention violent, and she didn't need her hens terrorized, mauled by spurs, or their eggs fertilized. But staring at this rooster, she felt a pull. The impulsive desire usually associated with a candy bar at the checkout. She slid her finger into the wire weave of his cage and stroked a shiny auburn feather. She cringed, expected him to peck her. Instead, he stared, steady. Again she mopped her forehead with her bandana.

When the Rhode Islands came up for bidding, everyone looked at Avis.

"Thirtyandaquarter," shouted the auctioneer, everything one word.

Avis knew she had first bid if she wanted the chickens. But not today. The rooster's lava eyes stayed with her, and she only had so much money. The crowd watched her where she sat on her hard metal bench. She shook her head.

The auctioneer stared for a minute, then turned to the crowd in the arena seats. "Who'll give me thirty and a quarter?" he asked. He broke his auctioneer voice, and the words came slow.

The building was silent. Everyone looked at Avis, who shook her head again.

Then the little girl jumped onto the gate, her mother swatted her, and the bidding got underway.

"Is something wrong with those pullets?" Avis heard someone whisper.

"Nothing wrong with them," Avis said, louder than necessary as the chickens sold for a much lower price than normal.

Avis saw Jim's face turn crimson and he glared at her. She remembered his words from earlier. Hell to pay. He kicked the sturdy corral's frame and the whole section of fencing quivered.

The next lot was up, and two mottled irises locked with Avis's own.

"Nineteenseventyfive," said the auctioneer. All one word again, the first syllable longer than the rest. "I've got nineteenseventyfive. Nineteenseventyfive for this rooster. Nineteenseventyfive." Then a long string of sound like the auctioneer was moving his lips with the flat side of his finger. "Nutherbidnutherbidnutherbid."

Avis thought the price was a little high, but she raised her card. Her eyes never left the rooster's.

"Thank you, onenineteen. Nineteenseventyfive. Do I see twenty? Who'll give me twenty?"

Another card went up. Like a tennis match, everyone's head turned toward the movement. It was Jim's. He stood up and waved it, glared at Avis.

"Thank you," said the auctioneer, but his glance darted back to Avis. "Twennyandaquarter?"

She nodded, raised her card.

"Twennyfifty?" In a flash of white, Jim had his in the air.

"Twennysevennyfive?" Avis had her card up before the question was out.

"Alright, folks, let's pick this up. Who'll give me—"

"Twenty-five!" Jim yelled.

The bidding moved well beyond any reasonable price, but something in the bird's eyes kept Avis going. With each new price, Jim got redder and his card higher, and Avis knew he only wanted the rooster so she couldn't have it. She rolled her eyes and raised her card again.

After a while, Jim took his pockets out of his pants and counted his money. By the shape of his mouth Avis knew he was out. He didn't raise his card again. She let out a breath she didn't know she'd been holding. She felt a little bad but, she told herself, he was the one jacked up the price.

In the payment office, she realized she bid more than she had to spend and her checkbook was at home.

"Just let me run home and back," she said, mopping her face. The small fan in the office only blew the sweat around. "You know who I am, you know I'm good for it."

"I know, Avis," said the woman behind the desk, "but the auction house rules say I just can't. We'll have to let Jim Franklin take the rooster, if he has the money.

Avis sat on a tree stump near the back of the barn, hidden from direct view as the rooster was loaded into the bed of Jim's red truck. It was rusty and old, with dings in the door. Avis thought it seemed familiar, maybe she'd seen it in town. But there were quite a few rusty red trucks around.

Jim threw the cage into his truck. The rooster landed on its side in a flurry of feathers. The cage was too short for him to stand up. Eventually, Jim set it upright and tied it in place with some old blackened twine. Avis didn't look at Jim once. He got into his truck, slammed the door, and squealed his tires as he took off. Avis watched the rooster's shape until it disappeared over a hill in the road.

Soft clucking followed Avis as she moved around the yard. It was a humid day, the kind where walking outside is like being wrapped mouth first in a warm, wet blanket. The sun beat on Avis's bare head and the hens' brown and black and white feathers. They pecked and scratched at the soil, only moving small pieces at a time the ground was so packed and dry. Avis sat back on her bent knees and looked around the yard. Half the mint was planted. Since a few sprigs of mint can take over an entire garden, she only had two small pots to transplant. She took off one of her thick gloves that she wore even on the hottest days to keep the plant oils from giving her a rash. She wiped her hand on the back of her blouse, felt the sun on the pruny pads of her fingers. Soon the heat dried them and straightened the wrinkles out.

Two red hens sent up a cackle from the middle of the yard near the road, right next to the city limit sign that divided her property in half so that her house was in town, and her chicken coop in the country. A worm stretched out of the ground, pulled by a pointed yellow beak. The hen held the worm fast. She raised her head, bit, swallowed one half, and dropped the rest on the ground. She stepped back while the other hen scurried forward to share the snack.

The hens had eaten or scratched into the grass almost all the grit Avis had laid down. She walked through the hens clustered around the coop and into the squat building without ruffling a feather. Others, she knew, had to walk backward and sideways if they didn't want to startle chickens, but she never had. She could always tell when someone was around, even just the occasional neighbor kid on a bike, because of the hens. They would start a racket if anyone got too close to the grass where they gathered. But Avis could come as close as she liked. She had always been able to walk straight through the hens.

Sunlight filtered through the small slits in the boards, enough so Avis didn't have to turn on the light to find her way and get more grit. She grabbed the smooth handle on the red shovel already in the bag and scooped out enough for the dirt in front of the henhouse. Before heading out, she stopped at the two rows of nesting boxes to check for eggs. She found one, still warm with a little manure the color of drywall paste, and lifted it from its straw bed.

Outside, all the hens squawked at once, loud and shrill, a kind of warning cry Avis had never heard before. She could hear the beat of wings, like a heavy rug against the railing.

The noise grew and reverberated inside the coop. Avis dropped the egg, heard it splat against the ground, and flung the scoop as she ran outside.

She froze. A rooster was in her yard. He lunged at one of her hens, and his body covered everything but the soft feathers on her head. His orange irises, his hard beady eyes locked on Avis, and she couldn't break the stare. She knew him, knew those eyes. He was the rooster from the auction. With all the spring canning and brining and weeding, she almost forgot about losing the bid.

Now he was in her yard. She could see the torn feathers in his plume, the large chunks missing from his comb, the half-healed fleshy scratch on the side of his head, a blood stain on his left foot where the feathers were whitest. He looked like his life had been rough since she'd seen him last.

The hen he had jumped flailed and screeched. He held on. His black plume feathers shook as his spurs scratched at her sides and he pecked at the feathers on her back, tearing them out, scattering them over the lawn in his brutal mating ritual. The other hens milled around, squawked and beat their wings, close enough for support but not close enough to have their own feathers ripped out.

Avis felt her cheeks go cold. She ran toward the scene, waving her arms high above her head, hopping from side to side, hoping the movement would startle the rooster.

"Shoo!" she yelled. "Get away from her!"

The rooster jumped off the hen who stumbled away to commiserate with the rest of the flock, but he was anything but startled. He turned his head and looked at Avis. As the seconds ticked by, she felt her heart pound a steady beat.

Sweat itched the skin under her collar.

He spread out his wings and ducked his head. She knew she should back up, but held her ground. Then the attack. He flew up. In the second he was airborn, Avis saw his body scattered, an impressionist depiction of a rooster. Pain jolted the thought from her head. In a single stroke, the rooster jammed his spur, harder than a thick human fingernail, into Avis's forearm.

Her eyes searched the ground for some kind of weapon and she tensed up for another attack, but the rooster strutted away.

Avis examined her wound. A deep puncture. Thin as her arms were, she wondered if it reached the bone. She tried to remember her last tetanus shot and couldn't.

Watching the rooster as he pecked and scratched around the yard, she picked up her thick gardening gloves and went inside. She tracked his movement through the large kitchen windows facing the side yard. From the tallest cabinet, she pulled down the jug of grain alcohol she mixed with washing soda to take grease residue off her cupboard doors. She poured a good amount in a plastic cup, and loaded an eyedropper with the clear, potent liquid. From the window, she could see the rooster picking feed from the grass near the town limit sign.

Holding her arm over the sink, Avis dashed a little of the grain alcohol over the puncture. Teeth grit, stock still, she waited out the searing pain until it subsided to a dull ache under the faucet's running water.

She thought about taking the rooster back to Jim. Call the auction house, get Jim's number. But she only lost by a technicality, a glitch in the rules. She was the winning bidder. Maybe she'd just give Jim his money back. But she wasn't as young as

she used to be, and a wild rooster was the last thing she needed. She remembered the way Jim tossed the cage in his truck and how it the cage clanged around as he drove off. She saw again the rooster's mangled comb and blood-stained breast. She'd just find Jim soon and pay him for the rooster. He'd probably be glad to have the dumb thing off his hands.

She pulled on the gloves, grabbed the dropper, and stepped outside.

She attacked from behind. She grabbed the rooster by the neck and, kneeling, forced him backward until he was wedged between her knees and fist. Startled, he crowed and clucked and squirmed. When he saw the dropper coming toward him, though, his beak clamped shut. Using the tube's tapered tip, Avis pried his beak open, held his flat avian tongue down, and squeezed the rubbery end to release the alcohol. She held him tight until his eyes drooped and closed, until he stopped struggling, until he went limp. She left him on the ground.

"I'd put that rooster down, Avis," said the doctor as he twisted her arm back and forth, examining the wound. "Just a matter of time before he attacks someone's kid and then there'll be real trouble."

"I should know better than to step in the middle of a yard fight." She didn't look at the doctor, but stared at the glass jars full of tongue depressors, cotton balls, swabs. She shifted in her seat, uncomfortable.

"A child might do the same thing. I use to have chickens myself. I know it's not a pretty scene when a rooster takes after a hen like that. This wound is very clean." He wiped around it.

"You have to expect aggression in roosters," she said.

"It's been so long since I had one, it surprised me today." A picture of two puppies hung above the extra chair. Avis wondered if they were his dogs or a picture out of a frame.

"Everyone looks the other way about your chickens, Avis. The first time something happens, animal control will be in there saying they told you so." His arm moved in a circular motion as he wrapped the gauzy bandage around her forearm.

"The coop isn't in city limits. They can't do a thing." She glanced at his watch as it moved in and out of the glare from the overhead sodium lights.

"Well, let's hope it won't come to it. I'd still put the animal down. You shouldn't need to be afraid to go out into your own yard. I'll have the nurse give you your tetanus shot."

Before she turned onto her street, Avis thought she saw the flash of a red truck go over the hill in front of her. She sped up, a good ten miles per hour over the speed limit, hoping if it was Jim she could flag him down. When she got to the top of the hill, the flat stretch of road was empty.

Rubbing her arm, stiff and sore from wrist to shoulder, she pulled into her driveway. She stepped into the mudroom, its wood floors painted brown to hide the dirt she tracked in, and grabbed the gloves.

She found him in the chicken coop, sitting in a nesting box and clucking with the soft urgent sound of a hen. His eyes were almost closed, revealing only a slit of the orange iris. Avis tiptoed backward toward the entryway and was almost out the door when the rooster's lids shot open. He gave her his hard, black-rimmed stare, made little hops in a circle so he was perched on the edge of the box looking in, and pecked at the

egg inside. Avis heard the soft crunch as the egg's shell broke, watched his large, floppy comb move up and down as he ate the gooey yellow insides. Avis had seen well-fed, healthy chickens eat eggs before, but only when one was broken by accidental fall or sharp and careless chicken foot, and then the action then seemed more out of curiosity and a need to clean up than anything else. The rooster's motivation was something different.

Avis didn't try to interfere, just backed out of the coop, shut the door, and surveyed the yard. The hens were scratching and pecking as normal. The only sign of attack was the red and white feathers blowing across the grass, and the bald hen who was sharing another worm in the middle of the yard. Her flesh looked human, except for the stippled spots where her feathers used to be.

Avis pulled on her gloves and bent down to plant the rest of her mint.

Avis saw lights flash in her window and put her fingers between the blinds to peek out at the darkening road. That day she had seen a red truck drive by, toward town. She ran outside to flag it, but it didn't even stop at the sign. She noticed that the word Toyota was missing an O on the back.

She opened the blinds to rotating blue lights. She took her earplugs out. The high-pitched, gravelly scream of the rooster's crowing made her head pound. He'd been at it all afternoon. She was surprised it had taken so long for someone to complain.

She waited until the officer knocked to open the door.

He spoke just as the rooster crowed again.

"Sorry, say again?" Avis held the edge of the door with both hands as she leaned out.

"My name is Officer Morton. We've received a number of complaints about your rooster disturbing the peace."

"The rooster is outside city limits," Avis said, hoping the bird had stayed by the coop where he had been ten minutes ago.

"The noise is inside city limits." Officer Morton winced as the rooster crowed again. "Aren't those things only supposed to crow at dawn?"

"Would anyone rather he crowed at dawn?" asked Avis.

"Look, ma'am, come out to the yard."

Avis watched the rooster get ready to go again. He stretched his neck, the long red feathers rising, and let it out. He sounded like four roosters. His right eye focused on Avis, and she noticed that he swung his head down a little, like the noise was being pulled from him.

"He's got some powerful lungs," said Officer Morton.

Avis nodded, but she focused on the rooster's battered comb and his bloodied feathers, now an oxidized brown. "You know, Officer, this might interest you. Some say a rooster's silence will prove a man's innocence, but crowing is a protest against his crime. Maybe this rooster's trying to tell you something."

The policeman took off his sunglasses and squinted at Avis. "You get him quiet soon, or I'll have to call animal control."

"I'm sure it's almost out of his system," she said.

After the squad car pulled away, she got down the bottle of grain alcohol, pulled on the gloves, and headed to the yard.

Avis sat on her deck, watching the fireflies signal to each other on the lawn. Now and then she heard a motor or shout from the road, but the neighborhood was otherwise peaceful. The house blocked out light from the street lamps further up, and the warm evening made her lemonade taste sweeter, colder. She put her hands on the white railing. Looked up at the sky. Not a single cloud. The state could do with a little rain. It had been dry for too long now, and the earth was starting to crack in spots the grass wouldn't cover. Down the road toward the farms, crops were wilting, and the weather service had issued a burn ban. Mr. Henderson down the way found out it was too dry for fires before the weather service told him. He'd charred all the grass on his levies trying to burn up a feedbag. The fire ran to either side of his farm. Avis called the fire department when she saw the plumes of smoke from her house.

As the night grew darker, she saw a strange red light, small and round like one of the fire flies, but moving in a straight line across the lawn and burning steady. Avis wondered if the bug was walking along a branch or board. She knew some fireflies could flash a reddish-orange light, but she'd never seen one the color of an ember, and it hadn't blinked. She squinted. The outline of the rooster's shape was just visible, bobbing across the yard behind the light. Confused, she ran down the deck steps, close enough to see the lit cigarette in his beak. He dipped it close to the dry, browning grass. Avis rushed forward faster than the rooster could react, grabbed his neck, and shook. He opened his mouth, but the cigarette hung on and she realized it must be glued. She shook it loose and it fell to the ground. She stared at it a moment, but held the rooster firm. Although she was doubled over, she shot her foot forward and squashed the flame.

She didn't let go of the rooster as she grabbed the cigarette butt and headed toward the house. He flapped his wings and flailed his feet, only following her for a second before he ran out of air. She held onto his neck, hoping she wouldn't hurt him. In a wild instant, she thought how easy it would be to tighten her grip, twist her hand and be done with it. But when her foot hit the bottom stair, she threw him away from her, shut the gate, and ran inside.

The squashed butt had a cork-colored filter and a green logo, with two interlocking O's that looked like a Venn diagram. Avis threw it in the trash and walked to the front of the house to peer out the window.

A vehicle squealed its tires somewhere up the road. She grabbed her wallet and ran outside.

The red truck moved toward her house, probably heading to the country and the gravel roads. From the sidewalk, she waved her arms and yelled, tried to make it stop. As the driver window whizzed by, she saw a man's face turned toward her, his mouth set in a line. It was Jim. A loud crow emerged from the truck as its motor revved and it sped out of sight, a man's imitation of cockle-doodle-doo. The rooster crowed back, weak. Avis saw the truck's missing O illuminated by the last street light.

On the way inside, something crunched beneath her feet. A can of tomato juice, crushed flat.

Breathing was hard, Avis felt a little dizzy. She cracked the knuckles on her right hand, her nervous habit.

"What on earth," she muttered.

She went inside and picked up the phone. She dialed a nine, then stopped. What could she say? There was nothing illegal to report. She put the phone on the hook and turned every lock in the house before she went to sleep.

Avis adjusted the temperature on the mudroom sink's faucet and slid her hands under the running water. She squirted a quarter-sized dollop of special soap into her left palm and rubbed her hands and arms until they turned red. She had picked up the grass clippings after mowing the lawn, and some had slipped down her gloves.

Loud squawking made Avis run outside without drying her hands. She hurried, not knowing whether she would be confronted with a person or the rooster.

Outside, she found both.

The little boy was perched on his bike, eyes wide and finger hooked behind a tooth, watching as the rooster attacked. Once again the bird dug his spurs into the side of a hen and rocked himself as he pulled out her feathers from the point of their hollow shafts, leaving her, like the other hen, bald. She didn't fight, just put her head on the ground so her small red comb lay in the dirt. The others made the racket, clucking and beating their wings.

The kid on the bike rolled a little closer to the edge of the grass, finger still hooked behind tooth. Avis hoped he didn't know exactly what he was seeing.

"That's it," she yelled, startling the little boy who rode off toward his own house. The rooster kept rocking and pecking out feathers.

Avis grabbed a two-by-four from beside the coop and smashed it down on top of the rooster. The hen underneath scrabbled free and ran under the deck. She answered the other hens in long, brooding clucks.

Avis felt the breath catch in her throat. The rooster was still. She poked him with her boot. He didn't move. She nudged him with the two-by-four. Didn't move. She felt tears prick with salty heat and she blinked them back. She peered closer, and saw the rooster's rib cage move up and down.

She grabbed him, dragged him to a grass-bare spot, pointed his face down at the ground and drew a line over and over in the dust. The motion hypnotized him, made his muscles unworkable. "Nice rooster," she said. "Nice rooster," she repeated until she felt his frame sag into the crook of her arm. She sat him up, squatted down to his level, and looked him in his glazed eye. "Nice rooster."

Avis unrolled the garden hose and dragged it toward the mint. The cuttings still looked brown. Some drooped, doubled over themselves in the dirt. She held her thumb over the nozzle to turn the stream into a spray. The chilly water numbered her thumb, and she felt her body cool as the blood flowed past the cold water to the rest of her limbs.

A noise behind her. She turned, felt aware of herself, but all she saw were her hens. The rooster was in the coop, sitting on an egg. Avis figured it was worth sacrificing an egg for every time he woke out of a stupor. Each time she had the dropper in his beak, she thought of giving him a lethal dose. And each time, those mottled irises fixed her in a gaze she couldn't be the first to break. She'd take the dropper out. In fact, she'd taken to giving him a little less all the time.

Another noise. A rock tumbling from the hand-made border around her garden. This time she spun around and saw him behind, his eyes fixed on her. The fallen rock lay by his foot.

"You're not supposed to be over here," she said.

The rooster cocked his head to one side.

"This side of the yard is not for chickens. Get away." She gestured at him with her free arm.

He closed his eyes almost all the way without breaking contact with hers, then opened them again and pecked at the ground.

Eye contact broken, Avis turned around and ignored him, but kept her wrist ready to flick the hose in his direction. His presence behind her raised goose bumps on the backs of her arms.

The cold had moved beyond a pleasant numbing and into a blue-thumbed pain. Plants watered, she released the stream. She held the hose low and walked over to clean up whatever mess the rooster had left when he sobered up. She dragged the hose through the grass, water flowing out behind her. The rooster hopped along, avoiding the hose and drinking the water trail as he stood in it.

Avis leaned into coop, careful to keep the hose outside on the hard packed clay and off the dirt floor inside. She reached into the nearest nesting box where she had left the rooster earlier, braced herself for the stickiness of drying yolk and the crunch of eggshell under her fingers. Instead, she touched something soft and warm. It gave under her fingertips. She wrapped her fingers around it and brought it out in the light. An egg with no shell. Soft and rubbery like a water balloon, and translucent so the orange yolk seemed to glow where it pressed against the membrane. Her thumb created an indent, like a head on a pillow. The rooster had let it be, hadn't broken it.

The nearby squeal of tires made Avis jump.

She rushed out of the coop, spray from the hose flying, and saw the red Toyota swerve down the street. It blew the stop sign.

The rooster's eyes were blurry and wide, his neck stretched as tall as it would go, his beak screaming cockle doodle doo.

She woke to the smell of smoke, but no alarms. She lay still sniffing the air, trying to wake herself up if it was a dream. Her lungs did not prick, her eyes did not feel scratchy, but still the heavy smell of smoke remained. She shot out of bed, ready to inch her way downstairs in search of the source. The glow outside her window stopped her.

Orange, yellow, red flames shot from the chicken coop. No hens in sight, just the rooster sitting on his tail feathers in the middle of the lawn, swaying his head side to side as if woozy. She ran outside in her tattered nightgown. She grabbed the hose and a white five-gallon bucket. Cranked the water full blast. When she filled the bucket, she could barely lift it high enough to douse the flames, but she still hadn't seen a single hen, so she took a deep breath, hoisted the thing, and shoved it forward. It made only a small difference. She pointed the hose at the flaming coop and sprayed, but the force of the water was not enough to get anything wet except the ground. She took a step forward, but the blistering heat against her bare legs and arms sent her shuffling backward.

She filled the bucket again.

After a few, her muscles felt like noodles, and her forearm ached where the rooster had jabbed her. She hoisted the next bucket onto her shoulder. It slipped, drenched her nightgown. She threw what was left.

For the next half hour, she threw bucket after bucket of water at the burning shed.

Some almost full, most almost empty. Her bare feet squished in the mud hole she had made.

Finally the last flame burned itself out on the coop's muddy foundation. Avis fell back on the grass, exhausted. She felt the mud seep through her thin fabric, making her backside as wet as the front, but she didn't move. She couldn't smell burnt feathers or charring flesh. There was a good chance the hens had escaped as soon as the fire's light woke them.

The rooster got up and strutted in circles around her. She tensed and glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, but his were focused straight ahead on the ruined building. They both watched the smolders on the roof until they were gone.

Avis woke again as the sun came up. The rooster crowed once, but his voice was subdued, and Avis wondered if she was the only one who had been able to hear it. Placing both hands on the ground to steady herself, she got to her feet and saw the hens filing from under the house deck, their heads bobbing as they crossed the lawn to their charred house. One squawked and poked around near the ash, then ran off with something brown dangling from her beak.

Avis followed her. "Why don't you share that worm?" she said, catching the hen on the ground. "We've all had a long night." She pulled the worm from the hen's beak to give the others, but it was hard and dry. A cigarette butt. She slipped it between her first two fingers, examined its brown filter and green interlocking O's. She crushed it in her clenched fist.

In the mud hall, she pulled on a jacket and a pair of mud-caked canvas pants under her nightgown.

She slipped the cigarette butt in her pocket. She caught the rooster and put him in back seat of the car, slammed the door shut before he could hop back out.

The sun was rising on its own time, and most of the yard was still in shadow. Avis drove into the country.

It didn't take her long to find Jim. Where the pavement turned into gravel, the red Toyota was parked in front of a ranch-style house with a grungy chicken run, both dark and silent in the early morning. He had to drive right by her house to get to town.

She pulled the handle. The truck was unlocked. And a mess. She rifled through papers, hats, old tomato juice bottles. She spotted a pack of cigarettes in the far corner under the glove compartment. The interlocking O's. She had her hand on it when a voice made her bang her head on the truck's doorframe.

"Hey!" Jim came out of the little house, fully dressed, holding a bat low to the ground. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Collecting evidence." She felt the hem of her nightie, sticking out from her canvas jacket, flutter a little in the wind.

"Of what? How would you like it if I rifled through your car?" He opened the door to her sedan with his free hand. He paused when he saw the rooster and Avis could tell he was unsure how to proceed. "Well hello there," he said finally. He stared unfocused at the bird then collected himself and whirled around, a little too dramatic. "You stole my rooster," he said.

"No, and you know it," said Avis. "You abused him and then dropped him off to torment me and my hens."

Jim ignored her. "After I spent a fortune on him at that auction and got nothing for my pullets. Get out of here before I call the cops."

"Call them," Avis said. "I want to talk to an officer myself. You burned down my chicken coop."

Jim stepped away from the car, toward her. She backed up, but only a step.

"I know you're the one gave him a burning cigarette next to my coop in the middle of a fire warning."

The rooster hopped out of the car and strutted over.

"Lady, you're crazy," said Jim. He took a step forward. "I don't even know where you live."

"You saw me on the sidewalk waving plain as day," said Avis.

Jim moved his head backward a centimeter, as if surprised. He gripped his bat and held it in the air. "Get off my property."

Avis looked at the rooster, at the spot on his head where the feathers still hadn't grown back. "You know," she said, "some say a rooster's silence will prove a man's innocence while his crow will prove he's guilty. Go ahead and try him."

Jim stooped and put his free hand out, the fingers bent and ready to draw back. "Hey buddy," he said.

The rooster turned his hard dark eyes on Jim. He shuffled forward a step. He arched his neck and opened his beak.

CHAPTER 13

LAZY RIVER

From the air, the Middle River doesn't look like much. One of the punier arms of the Des Moines River, maybe just a finger, pointing West and flowing East.

On the water, the farmland disappears behind banks so high tracks become mudslides where deer and other animals couldn't keep their footing. The riverbed is a wide gouge, much deeper in the middle. Ancient trees line the way, obey the river's space, keep tight to the banks and send their roots all the way down. Climbing down the banks is a descent into a parallel place, the bottom of the world.

And four inner tubes down there, strung together with a muddy piece of rope.

Dana is the furthest back. The cooler in his lap makes him heavier and slows the whole caravan. It digs through his trunks to mark his skin and the unshaded parts of his inner tube burn his elbow when he shifts uncomfortable against them. Bella, the lightest, floats ahead, the tips of her dark hair trailing behind her like a trolling fishing line. Her black rubber raft twirls to Victoria behind her left, then Carter behind her right, always twisting away before he sees her face. She hasn't looked at or spoken to Dana all day, but her chatter for his cousins is endless. Now she turns to Victoria, who examines her toenail polish, balancing on her glute to get her foot to her face.

"Vic," Bella says, "look over there," and points out some bird or reptile or brown squirrel on the bank. Following her finger, Carter asks a question. She gives a long

explanation about the cooling and protective properties of mud, from what Dana can hear in the back. He wants to ask something too, but he doesn't know enough about nature life to ask something intelligent and is afraid she'll pretend not to hear him anyway. Miserable, he pulls a beer from the cooler and guzzles it down. Throws the crushed can in the river. It floats beside him.

"I'll take one of those," says Carter who turned toward the sound of released carbonation. "Vic?"

Victoria turns to Dana, makes an ugly face. "No way, they're all gross."

Dana rolls his eyes. Victoria forgot the ice when she was raiding the beer from her parent's garage fridge. He'd filled it with brown river water, part to keep the cans cool and part because he knew it would annoy her. She blew the hair out of her face, a sign she was annoyed, but kept quiet.

"You can wipe it off," Dana says and feels for a can in the murky water.

Victoria smiles with only her bottom lip and he knows what's coming next. Not what exactly, but it will be outrageous, random, and fiction.

"I shouldn't be drinking anyway," she says. She turns her smile downward and rubs her bare, flat stomach.

"I'll still take one," Carter says, ignores his sister.

Dana ignores her too. He's only been back to his hometown two weeks, but he already knows better than to believe her. He figured after years away, with only the occasional no-photo card from either side at Christmas, they would have all grown up, changed as he feels he has, thrown off old bad habits to acquire new ones. But the Victoria of his childhood resurfaced right away. He'd only been in his new room next to

hers for half an hour when she entered, saying she'd eaten the cheese her mother had been saving for dinner. She was in tears. She didn't have a license couldn't he drive her to the store. When they got to the market, she didn't have her wallet would he please buy the cheese and she'd repay him. Back home, Dana put the new cheese away in the drawer and found a full package of the exact same already there. He pointed this out, and Victoria shrugged, opened the package and got out of a knife. When she had a huge chunk her mouth she pointed the knife at him, then at the cheese. "Hungry?" Later when she drove off to Bella's house he saw her wallet sticking out of her jeans pocket.

"You want a beer, Bella?" Dana says. He tries to make it sound like something that doesn't matter, but all he wants is an excuse to get up and walk to her place in the river.

She shakes her head without looking back, that hair shaking no also through the water.

"You're afraid of a little dirt, too?" Carter scoops a handful of water from the river, flings toward her. Bella laughs and swings away from him, easy balance with her leg stretched straight. And for the first time since they started out, Dana can see her face.

Overhanging trees mottle the light as she turns around to splash Carter back. Like this, with her mouth open and only her torso and arms visible, she looks like anyone else and Dana has a flash thought, happy, that he's losing interest. Then Carter spins her tube toward back toward him, into the sun and she lifts, reaches for the stupid head wrap he's wearing. Dana glares at Carter, feels a vortex inside his chest, wants to rip the blue fabric off his head, tell Bella about his cousin's sweating problem, that if she touches that wrap her hand will come away wet and salty.

Carter's eyes catch on Dana. He adjusts his wrap, returns Dana's glare. After a long minute, he cocks his head, shoulders relax.

"How about it, Cuz?" He stands up a little, keeps one leg in his tube, stretches his hand back across his inner tube.

The cans are tall and Dana has a hard time getting his hand around them, but he feels for one in the very bottom, trying to scrape some sand and hold the muddy grains against the lip as he pulls it out, hands it to Carter. His cousin presses it to his lips, spits the sand away, and sits down to drink it.

Dana pours the cooler water over the hottest parts of his inner tube and his knees. He can see they're getting sunburned. Poking his skin, the pink turns pale and back, a sure sign he'll need aloe vera later. He sets the cooler in his lap again without refilling it, tries to keep it from rubbing against the edges of the developing burn. He wishes he could clamber back up the bank to the truck where it's parked on the roadside, but they've been floating a long time now and he doesn't want to walk back all that way by himself. Once, by himself in the water at eight years old, he'd stumbled across a snapping turtle and nine years later the heart-clenching fear of that encounter still hasn't fully left him.

His ass drags on sand. The river runs shallow the next thirty feet or so, shallow enough that butts can't clear the riverbed from the inner tubes. Before Carter can, Dana jumps up, grabs just Bella's rope with one hand, cooler in the other, and tugs her over the shallow parts until the water runs deeper again. Carter and Victoria stand, pull their inner tubes behind them. Dana can hear Carter muttering, his syllables fast and unintelligible, until he gets back in his position closest to Bella and Dana is forced again to the back.

He glares at his cousins' backs, resents all over as he has every day the past two weeks having to live the pattern of their lives. Getting up when they get up, often to the sound of Victoria's cranked up music in the next room. Eating what they eat, his aunt's chosen gluten-free diet sending him into town every day for the most glutinous thing he can find. Doing what they want to do, as the only people his age he knows in town anymore. It wouldn't be fair to say that Dana was forced back to his hometown, to move into the spare bedroom in his aunt and uncle's house with the too-small bed for his six foot three inch frame, spend his last year and a half until adulthood with grown people he had only known as children. He chose to go. Just out of high school, graduated too early and too bored with schooling to get any more, he needed a job and a cheap place to live. And out of Minnesota. One night his mom said, casual, like she was mentioning something they needed at the store, "You know, you still have family in Iowa." And the choice was made. He didn't know how long he planned to stay in Aunt Cate and Uncle Mike's house, but now he knows it will be just long enough to find a job and save some money and not a minute longer. His aunt and uncle were okay, but he wouldn't be tubing with his cousins this afternoon if Bella had decided not to come.

They bump tubes in this deeper water as the current pushes them fast along. They float under a red suspension bridge. It looks built to hold heavy vehicles, but the road is dirt on either side. Not another soul in sight.

As they float by, Victoria turns back to watch the bridge. "Where are we?" she asks. "I don't remember that bridge."

Carter says he doesn't know, finishes his beer.

Dana shrugs.

He hasn't been on this river for years, and nothing about it looks the same.

Ahead, a thick branch hangs over the water, close enough to the ground to reach.

"Are we lost?" asks Bella. She's been lying low in her raft for a while and when she sits up Dana can see her back is soaked.

"You can't get lost on a river," says Carter.

Ahead a thick tree branch hangs low over the water.

"Let's stop up there," Carter says. "Figure out what we want to do."

Dana, Victoria and Carter get out of their tubes and splash toward the tree. The cool water feels good on Dana's growing sunburn. Carter grabs the mess of rope, pulls Bella and the inner tubs to shore. She stands, and Dana is impressed how well she balances on one foot in the water. Long gym shorts over her bikini bottoms to hide her injury. Dana hasn't been able to find a good word for her leftover limb. Stump seems too coarse for something that belongs to Bella. Instead, he focuses on what it might look like. Whether the skin is tight and clear, the suture marks almost invisible after so many years, or mottled purple and pink, the skin still struggling to pull apart where it was never meant to be sewn together. If there's extra skin below the truncated bone, like his grandpa's old war amputation, and if that extra skin would move to either side if he took it in his hands and pulled. And if maybe there are callouses, places where the skin has toughened itself against the brace that holds up her artificial flesh, when she wears her prosthetic. She wore it with a skirt the first time he met her, which he thought was brave, and he liked her right away.

Dana's first full day back in Madison was Victoria's birthday, her seventeenth. He was hanging streamers in the kitchen.

Bella walked into the house like it was her own.

"A friend of Vic's?" he asked from his stepladder. He had piece of tape on every finger. He couldn't take his eyes off her prosthetic. Unlike his grandpa's utilitarian metal leg, hers was pumpkin orange, the metal work so intricate it almost looked like lace.

She followed his gaze. "You can stop staring at it," she said. The bored way she said it made him embarrassed to be just one more person who acted like they'd never seen such a thing. But in this case, he really hadn't.

"It's beautiful," he said, because it was.

Her expression softened and she smiled. "Thank you," she said. "It was a gift."

Victoria thumped downstairs and whirled her away to her room before he could think of something else to say. "That's just my cousin," he heard Victoria say. "Don't let him bother you."

When the party got underway, Dana went outside to get away from Victoria's friends and their noise. He sat on the wide back stoop and found someone was already there. He could hear them breathing.

"Hello?" he said to the dark.

"Hi," said Bella. She scooted closer. "Had to get away from the noise."

From there, there was no lull in their conversation. An owl hooted and Bella told him about collecting and dissecting their pellets, which he'd heard about but never done himself—the fur, bones, sometimes pieces of yard trash like foam and mylar inside. When the porch light clicked on and a fat brown squirrel ran out of the spotlight, he couldn't stop talking about how huge the squirrel was and she laughed and he told her

about the smaller gray squirrels in Minnesota. They talked about Victoria and Carter and compared the Minnesota and Iowa state fairs. Even though she'd never been to the one in Minnesota and he was too young to remember the times he went to the one in Iowa, both were sure their own fair was the best.

"Don't kid yourself, Minnesota" she said. Their laughter echoed in the fenced yard. The porch light flicked on and off. Victoria's face appeared behind the glass before she stepped out.

"Party's over," she said. "You guys missed the whole thing." She arched her eyebrows at them, and Dana could tell she was half angry, half amused.

Bella moved to stand. Dana hopped up and held out his hand. She reached for it, then quick withdrew it, like she had forgotten herself somehow.

"Oops," she said and pushed herself up. "Give me a minute," she said to Victoria, who went back inside and grinned at them through the sliding door.

"You can't trust anyone," she said. "No one can trust anyone. If someone ever believes you about something, it's only because they know its true for themselves. If it's only true for you, they'll never believe it. It's lonely but it's true."

"What are you talking about?" Dana asked. He scratched his head, his scalp itchy suddenly. "Where is this coming from?"

"Victoria is my best friend and I can't even trust her." She smiled back at Victoria through the glass, gave a little wave.

"Well, no one should trust her," Dana said. "She's a liar."

Bella smiled. "People can be mean," she said.

When he asked what she meant, she wouldn't elaborate.

She stepped close to whisper. "Do you know my story?"

The question surprised Dana. "I don't think so?"

She nodded. "I don't think it's a good idea to get too close to me."

"What? Weren't we just—"

She interrupted. "Sorry. Nice to have met you."

She went inside and by the time he got in, she was gone.

So when she agreed to come on this trip, he thought maybe she would be ready to talk. Instead she's still avoiding him, and he's starting to think this is some elaborate game, that she's trying to make him jealous.

Carter hands Dana the muddy rope, steps toward Bella who lays a light hand on Carter's shoulder. He lifts Bella, one arm across her thigh, the other around her bare waist, her arm around his neck. Dana's teeth grind as Carter sets her on the branch then clambers up to sit close. In rough, quick motions, Dana ties the rope to the tree. The inner tubes bump against each other in the current. He stands below, water running around his ankles, and stares at the dark space in Bella's mesh shorts. He can almost see inside. Her other leg swings, pendulum style, her hands behind her keep her balanced steady on the limb.

"Well?" says Carter. "What do we want to do?"

Dana says nothing. He alternates between stealing glances at the two of them on the limb and focusing on his feet.

"I'll go ahead," Victoria says. "See if I can recognize anything up there."

"Dana, you should go with her," says Carter.

Dana stares up at him, his head at Carter's knees.

"I'm fine where I am." He steps onto the bank, leans out of sight against the tree.

"Won't be long." Victoria drags her legs forward through the water and disappears around the bend.

To Dana's right, a small movement. A butterfly flicks its wings on the trunk nearby and he knows this is his chance. Something he can ask about and she will have to respond. He captures it, an easy hand around vibrant yellow and steps into the river in front of the limb. Fingertips touching the edge of his palm just enough to hold the trap, he works to keep his grip light, feels the flutter against his skin.

"Bella." She looks at him, but he can tell if she had any other option she would take it. He smiles at her, tries to warm her expression with his own. She returns a half-smile, the polite kind.

"What kind of butterfly is this?" he asks. Holds up his open hands.

The butterfly is limp. It sags in the middle of his palm, looking trampled and bruised.

Bella gasps and Dana stares at his hand.

"Put it down," she says. "You're rubbing its powder away." And Dana sees it, a yellow dust clinging to his hand, wet in places where his hands must have been wet from the ropes and his own sweat.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I didn't mean—"

She cuts him off. "Just put it down, okay?"

A rotten stump up the bank looks like the best spot. He sets the butterfly down and it flies away. He wipes his hands on his dry chest.

When he gets back to the tree, Bella is hunched with Carter in close conversation.

Strands of her hair caught on his head wrap.

"Hey," Dana says. They look at him. "It's okay. It flew off."

They turn back together, and Dana listens to the conversation he wanted for himself as Bella explains to Carter the protective properties of butterfly scales, thankful to see Victoria coming into view, a feeling he wasn't used to associating with her. The night before, Dana had been lying on his bed filling out job applications when Victoria came in.

"I'm not taking you for more cheese." He tried it as a joke, but he heard the edge in his voice and cleared his throat to cover it.

She stood smiling. Her hair was twisted way up top her head, and her face was covered with one of those frightening pore masks.

"Are you supposed to smile with that on?" he asked. "I don't know the rules, but I don't think you are."

"Are you excited Bella is coming with us tomorrow?" Her grin cracked the clay around her dimples.

He felt his face go red, and looked back down at his application. It was too late.

"I knew it," she yelled and jumped into some kind of victory dance.

"Knew what?" he says, breathing slow to clear the color from his face.

"You like her."

"I don't know," he said. "It was kind of weird."

"What was weird?" She sat on his bed, which made him uncomfortable. He stared at the indent she made on his comforter, slid away from her.

"She asked me if I knew her story, like I should."

"Of course you should. Everyone knows that story." She scratched at a piece of loose wood on his bed frame.

"Stop that will you?"

She gave the piece of wood one more scratch and it came off. She flicked it at him. He picked the wood chip out of his hair.

"Sorry," Victoria said.

He ignored it. "I just moved back, remember? I'm not in the loop."

"That doesn't matter." She sighed. "She was run over by those scientists that came to town to investigate the tracks. Called them a ghost story. Years ago. That's how she lost her leg."

"Okay yeah I know this story," Dana said. "They ran the kid over and didn't even stop. That was her?"

Victoria nods. "It was. And a lot of people from town were there and felt bad, so they got together and bought her leg. It was really expensive."

They sat silent for a minute. Dana opened his mouth to say he still didn't understand but Victoria said, "She says she sees things."

She glanced at Dana from the corner of her eye, made a face. "Like she says she sees things all the time."

Dana leaned in. That was not what he expected. "What kind of things?"

"I don't know, just things. She doesn't like to talk about it." She shifted, tugged at a thread in the comforter. "Like ghost things. And weird things happen when I'm around her sometimes. Like I see human shadows and lights go on when no one flipped

them. I don't know if it's real or she's just playing a trick. She really likes tricks." Victoria didn't look up from her picking.

"So you don't believe her?" asked Dana, directing his eyes away from her fingers.

"I don't know if I believe her, but it's what she says," Victoria said.

Dana wants to ask Victoria now if she thinks today is a trick, if Bella is playing some elaborate jealousy game with him. But he doesn't know if he'd get a straight answer or not, or how he would get her alone to ask.

"I saw a tree I know," Victoria says as she slogs toward them, knees lifting high to clear mud and water.

"Are you sure?" asks Dana. He doesn't care if she's telling the truth, doesn't care if they follow this river forever as it runs into the Des Moines and the Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico, doesn't care if Carter gets eaten by a shark in Atlantic Ocean. He wants a fight.

"I can always recognize it because it looks like a woman." Victoria settles onto her tube. "She's reaching with her hands up like this." She raises her arms above her head, curls her fingers like she's holding a basketball, and turns her face toward the sky.

Bella and Carter nod as if this makes perfect sense.

Dana turns to them. "You really think she's telling the truth?"

"I don't really care," Carter mutters. I just want to see what's down there. It's easy enough to get back." He looks to Bella, and she says something so quiet Dana can't hear, but it sounds like agreement.

"Everything she says is a lie," Dana says.

To this point, Victoria's eyes have been shut as she continues to reenact the tree. Now they snap open, narrow on Dana. "Stay here then." She undoes his knot at the tree easily, as well as the complicated middle knot holding everything together. "We'll go on without you." The tubes, freed to the current, take off downriver, faster without the weight of their passengers. Victoria runs after three of them, lets the fourth go. "That one's yours," she says to Dana as Carter helps Bella down.

The loose tube floats toward the bend. Dana thinks about the car parked on the roadside near the bridge where they stepped and slipped their way down the muddy bank, holding onto small patches of grass, hoping the roots would hold. He could get in the car, drive himself back to Minnesota. Or south or west or anywhere. But he doesn't know a good way up the bank and as he realizes that he sees Bella looking at him, a look he doesn't think he's meant to see, but he sees it before she jerks her head away.

He runs after his inner tube, knees high and water splashing up to his ears.

It's hard to keep tabs on this river, or any river. In the early spring, when melted snow and ice gorge the banks, a swift-moving current full of trash and danger. Old couches float by, rusty car pieces the water dislodged from resting places. Parents warn their children to stay on the banks. Winter, they do the hammer test. If it doesn't crack through, the ice will hold a person. They skate and slide around tree roots that poke through. On the hottest summer days, the river is nothing but a trickle running through south central Iowa.

Private farms sit on either bank and just to travel with the river is trespassing. Each farmer's land extends to half the riverbed. But really who can account for an entire river? Every year, the farmers gain or lose land, depending where the river goes. Some

draw maps, conduct surveys, try to chart the path. But every toppling tree, stacked beaver dam, flash flood makes a change. I'm not sure you can keep track of something everchanging and so I've never tried.

Dana catches his tube as it rounds the bend and waits there, keeping himself still by planting feet through the inner tube and deep into silty mud. When the others come into view, the tubes are still floating separate. The cooler bobs along behind Carter's tube, the remaining cans in his lap and Victoria's. Bella, at the front still, studies a passing tree instead of looking ahead. He lets go as Bella floats by, says nothing. She faces forward, nods and when he grabs hold of her tube's rope, she keeps her gaze straight.

Dana's tube jumps forward and Bella's tube comes with. He looks back to see Victoria's painted toes retreating. Nose crinkled as if against a bad smell, she jabs her finger at the bank. The tree does kind of look like a woman, he has to agree. Two ripples of bark that could be arms reach and taper above the tree's curves, form an arch around an invisible object. He shrugs at his cousin and she smiles. Opens a beer and downs it, throws the empty can at Dana's head. She misses.

The push puts distance between the two pairs, and Dana takes the opportunity.

"Don't be mad at me." He murmurs it, almost mouths it, wonders if she can even hear it when she doesn't answer.

Then the softest reply. It could be the wind, but he knows better, knows what he hears. "I'm not."

"Do you really want to know?" Bella says, loud as he's ever heard her. Dana isn't sure what he means, but he's thankful for the attention, for her words, and he nods.

Dull clanking noise of aluminum against aluminum as Victoria and Carter clink beer cans behind, probably sharing some private joke. He goes to put his hand on Bella's right leg, she doesn't pull away. But his hand never makes it. It hovers above her thigh while he stares at the banks on either side.

They've entered a town. A place he's never seen, never knew existed or could exist here. The trees become sparse, and houses line the banks. There's something out of focus on this part of the river. It must be fog, but to Dana it seems more like looking through old glass. The gray underleaves cast shadows from trees that have almost grown together overhead and for the first time today he is completely in shade.

People stand outside, talking, laughing, watching the river. Some wave, others nod at the group floating through. A man with lots of dark hair smiles at them, his grin up to his gumline. The faces of the people on land are calm and unsurprised, the exact opposite of Dana's.

"What is this place?" Dana says, his voice low but clear.

A little girl in a dark dress with coarse patches smiles shy at him, then runs to hide behind a house. As he floats on, he sees her peer from behind a wall. Something gives him goosebumps. He can't remember seeing any of the girl's limbs. He sees Bella give a small wave, three fingers curled in the girl's direction and when he turns back the girl is gone. He shakes his head, tries to keep shock from messing with his mind.

"What is what?" says Victoria. She paddles with her hand to reach his rope, then pulls him backward through the water.

"This place," Dana says.

"This is the Middle River," says Victoria. "We've been on it all afternoon." She gives him a sideways look.

"Yeah but what about the people and the house and the—"

She gives him an even stronger look that makes him stop. "I don't see anything of that, Dana," she says, her voice soft and careful. "Do you, Carter?"

Carter shakes his head no.

"Bella, can you see it?" asks Carter.

Bella looks around, and Dana knows, just knows, everything her eyes are taking in.

"No," she says. "Just a bunch of trees." She points toward an older man sweeping his stoop. "And a lizard."

"How can you not see? It's right there." Dana can hear the frustration in his voice.

The fun is gone from his cousins' faces. They look at him in a way he's never seen. "We can't see them," Victoria finally says, face toward her lap.

"I can see more than Vic," Carter says. He looks at Bella, earnest.

Victoria shrugs, her face still down. "I've heard people who can see aren't right in the head, anyway." She glances up at Dana.

Bella smiles. It's a sad smile. She takes Dana's hand, something he's always wanted, but not like this.

And then: "I told you." The wind again, and not the wind.

CHAPTER 14

CONCLUSION

I balanced my heels on the narrow edge inside the horse stall, hung onto the wall behind me. Inside the barn was humid and the manure smells came off the dirt floor in waves. I let my eyes adjust to the dim light and saw the other kids, my opponents, at the walls, hanging on like me. Their torsos leaned out like poorly fastened posters, and I knew mine did too.

I didn't have long to get ready.

"One." Voices in the hayloft above and the main barn off to the side, all watching for the outcome said it together, a reverberating drum of sound. "Two." I tensed my body, ready for the inevitable. "Three." I was supposed to jump, and I did.

We jumped in unison, crashed into each other on top of a thin straw layer.

An elbow smashed hard against my neck. I pressed my lips to keep from crying out and slugged the nearest visible piece of flesh. From the mass of it, I guessed a shoulder. Someone shrieked and we became a pile of arms, legs, hands, and fists.

The one left standing, the winner, had his fists in the air. A bruise already formed over his left eye. I wondered if that's what I hit, not shoulder but eye socket. It was impossible to sort out the truth of events in the barn. Everything went by too quick and confusing. Rustling as money changed hands, a few distant insults from adult voices, men and women, at least one meant for me. A "have to do better than that, Isabel"

breathed on me from some man's dank breath as he leaned in the stall. The other kids and I sat panting on the manured floor. A metallic scent replaced the smell of horse mess, a sign that if my nose wasn't already bleeding, it would be soon. I pinched and tilted my head. Focused on one spot.

Rat holes marked the barn's edges. Burrows in the dirt floor, the rotted wood baseboard. I focused on one near me, tried to peer in, make out some shape in its dark interior. Some holes were occupied, some were empty, and you couldn't be too sure which was which.

We called it barn wrestling. Not just the kids who fought, but the gamblers too, their way of making it seem okay. Most of them were respected men and women in Madison. Dentists and bankers and shop owners. A few policemen. They treated it like a game we wanted to play. Some would rumple our hair or pat our shoulders as they walked to their cars, hands full of the money we had won them or in empty pockets with a "Better luck next time" before they drove off. I was never sure if they meant the luck for us or them.

The barn sat in an open pasture next to the tracks, and the train's roar was our signal to fight. The train became my enemy, pulling me to the barn in the middle of a bean lunch, a deep sleep, trip to the bathroom. I made up stories about its demise. Of ways it could run off its rails, away from the woods on the other side and toward the field or off the bridge and into Copper Creek. Crash it straight into the barn. Sometimes the engineer, crazed with anger over a fight with the higher ups who wanted him to take little pills to keep from sleeping, jumped the rails on purpose to make a point. Other times the train was old, too rusty to continue, and it broke down in Madison before it ever got here.

Or the railroad company decided they didn't like the stretch of track through Madison anyway and built new somewhere to go around us. When I told the stories, usually whispered late at night with the windows shut, someone always said a lot of pennies on the track might do. But I never had that many pennies. I found one once and laid it down. The train flattened it and kept going. I kept the thin copper in my skirt pocket.

The train moved slow through town before it got to our place, and the line of cars would already be pulling up the old dirt road as we walked across the yard to the barn. Myra and Evelyn, our mothers, strode ahead of us to greet their visitors.

Inside the guests picked up glasses and poured clear liquid from squatty buckets. At the barn, they could get the liquor they couldn't get anywhere else. Their favorite story was Myra got it from Chicago, bought it straight Al Capone. They told it to each other over and over, never caring if it was true or why they told it if it wasn't. I never said, but I stirred the dizzying liquid in the upstairs bathtub of the farmhouse every time Myra started a new batch, and cleaned myself in the creek with the others until the bathtub was free again.

One girl, half as big as the rest of us, climbed into that tub full of spirits the first day she was there. I never knew where Myra and Evelyn found the kids they brought home. They just showed up. The girl got in the tub and her scream filled the house, whistled through floorboards, traveled through airways, and vibrated my eardrums so I thought they would burst. When I found the source, she was draining the tub crossing herself and muttering about demon water put there by the devil himself never seen anything like it. I plugged the tub and tried to hush her, filled the tub to its original level with water, but Myra got there before I could finish. Silent, she slapped me across the

face, the smooth metal of her rings connecting with my cheek. Then she made me clear out the rat holes in the barn, the worst job of all because she wanted the poison set inside the hole where her visitors couldn't see. You had to reach your hand in and hope something didn't bite you.

When I got back to the house, Myra's handprint still red on my skin, the girl was gone, and I knew I'd been lucky.

The kitchen table was the best place in the house for writing. The mothers were cackling together in one of their bedrooms, and the others were unlikely to step foot in the kitchen until dinner. I took my notebook, a trashy novel one of the mothers had left around, and scribbled bold over the typed letters.

Four or five pages in, a shadow fell on my pages. I banged the book shut and got up, sure Myra or Evelyn had caught me. I'd never let them see before, sure they would tear up my writing as soon as they saw it.

When I saw Cline instead, I was so relieved I punched him in the gut.

He doubled over. "Jesus, Isabel," he said.

"Sorry." I sat back down, opened my book. "You scared me."

"Where's your mother?"

All the kids called both women mother, but Evelyn really was my mother, and Myra was Cline's. We were the two originals, although everything started before our memories did.

Cline was a large boy, puffy with skin the color of the undercooked dough we ate. No number of hours in the sun toughened and tanned his skin like the rest of ours, although Myra tried. She sent him to ride Rebel the solitary horse, the only one allowed

to ride him, and Cline would come back sunburned and saddle legged and get to skip his turn in the barn. Myra doted on him in a way Evelyn never did on me.

"They're laughing about something up there," I said. As I did, another disembodied giggle floated downstairs.

Cline smiled and stepped a little closer. He wanted to be friends, I knew. I didn't want to be anything except left to my work. I ignored him. He sat down across from me. I flicked my eyebrows up. Glared. He didn't take the hint.

"What are you writing?" he asked. "More train stories."

"No." I turned in my seat, balanced the book on my knee, kept writing.

"Something about me." He leaned a little across the table. Too close.

I thought about shoving him out of my space. I looked him in the eye. "Definitely not." I emphasized both words and he looked away first.

He made an annoying pop sound with his cheeks. I groaned under my breath and rolled my eyes.

"Look, Isabel."

He wasn't very good at whispering. His neck was tense, his eyes shifty. He was more nervous than I'd seen him before.

Before he continued, he swallowed hard. He was making me nervous too. "Look, I just came in here because I was wondering if you—"

His short nose went up in the air, a dog sniffing for something. "Put that away," he said, more hiss than whisper. When I froze, confused, he grabbed my book and threw it under the table.

The laughing upstairs had stopped. As my book hit the floor, the steps creaked.

I don't know how he knew she was coming, but the steps' weight and pace were unmistakably Evelyn's. I nudged the book under farther with the big toe sticking out of my sock.

At the bottom of the steps she was smiling, still living the conversation she'd just had with Myra, but when she saw us sitting together her face fell into a frown.

"What were you doing?"

"Nothing," I said.

She waited, expecting more.

"Just sitting." I played with a splinter sticking up from the table.

"I worry about you, Isabel." She looked out the window, where the kids who weren't doing chores or upstairs sleeping were lying in the sun. "I don't think you realize how lucky you are." She came over and ran her hand across my chin. Sighed. "Ugly little girl like you."

I said nothing, resisted the urge to worry the book pages with my toe. Cline saw and when Evelyn turned her back, he kicked it farther from me.

She went to the sink and ran the water a couple seconds. Without using any, she shut it off. Turned and studied me. Her long painted fingernails tapped on the counter.

"What have I ever denied you?" she said after a few minutes of staring at me.

I didn't answer.

Her eyes narrowed. Their glints sharpened into points.

"Nothing," she said. "Nothing, that's what. You have everything you need. And that's still not enough. You're still unsatisfied. After all I've given you." She picked up silverware in the sink and threw it down again, clatter of metal on metal making my

insides jump while I fought to keep my outside calm. She was rolling. "Most of the kids around here don't even have families. Think of that." She opened a cabinet door and slammed it. "You're a little brat."

I cut her off. "Yes, Mother." The standard response.

For years I had waited for it to happen again and it never had. I still had the scars, though. Only visible when I'd been inside too long in the winter and my skin turned ghostly like Cline's. Four light pink lines down the right side of my face. When her nails came toward me again, the lines pricked a little.

She stopped a half-inch from my skin and gave me a mean smile. Quick as she'd come in, she left again.

Cline let out a large breath, like he'd just come up from being underwater too long. I wanted to punch him again. Instead, I retrieved my book and went outside.

The mothers knew nothing about farming or farm equipment. They'd both grown up in town, but moved out here shortly after Cline and I were born to start their business. They never bothered with the farm stuff or even much general maintenance. The horse, who came with the land, ate whatever he could find. Fences were half up, half down. Large patches of grass died out from drought or flooding years ago left brown spots in the yard.

And the field was fallow. I sat in the middle one day, the dead weeds yellowed out to shining gold under the warm sun. I found some fabric in one of the barn's side rooms, a light canvas from an old sack hidden under horse grooming tools and broken tractor parts. I held it up to my only dress, and liked the way the light canvas looked against the dark skirt.

Tools borrowed from Evelyn's sewing basket, I cut dozens of tiny shapes.

I slipped off the dressed and sewed them on. Anyone at the house would have had to yell as loud as they could for me to hear them. If they saw me through the weeds and distance, no one would know I was in only my underwear. Still, I worked fast as I could without pricking my finger. I was never a good sewing student. I frustrated Myra and Evelyn to anger the times they tried to teach me, and myself to tears. But I made one stitch after another until they were all on. When I was done, they looked like birds. I put the dress on and traced every one of them with my finger. I was a little sorry they were sewn down to stay with me, and I had an urge to rip them off and fling them into the wind.

I traced them again and decided to keep them. When I went back inside, I was sure Evelyn would say something bad about my birds, maybe make me take them off and burn them. I tried to keep my back to her all evening, thinking I could at least keep them for one day, but she caught me facing front when I met her on the stairs to bed. She acted like she didn't see the birds. She never said anything about them.

The girl's back was a web of cuts. She'd gotten in the stall with the girl who liked to scratch. I dipped a cloth in the peroxide, touched it to her skin. She flinched a little each time, but never made a sound, kept her back hunched so the flesh would open a little and I could clean to the bottom of the wounds. She held the end of my skirt in one fist, a white canvas bird clenched inside.

She'd been there a long time and slept in the narrowest bed, the one next to mine. But as I bandaged the skin, her ribs poking through a little, the thought crossed my mind how little I knew her. Her name was Melinda. She had brown hair that knotted easy, that

she would pull at each night, the ripping washboard sounds audible in the hall as she worked through the mess. While she pulled she stared straight ahead, sometimes biting her lower lip as if for leverage.

Even though we slept five to a room, it was hard for me to get close to people I was supposed to clobber in the next few days. I'd knock a boy in the teeth or crush some girl's hand and have to live with it for days, their gentle chewing, their tender knife holding. None of us had ever seriously injured another. We had an unspoken line we wouldn't cross, for ourselves and each other, but all of us had regular bruises, scratches, cuts. We kept a bottle of peroxide, a box of bandages in each bedroom. Silent, we helped each other keep infection away, helped the skin to heal.

Wind came through the open window, humid damp, rustled my hair and cooled the sweat underneath. I was thirsty. I applied the last bandage and she rolled on her back without a word.

I leaned into the hall. Quiet. I knew Evelyn and Myra wouldn't like me in the kitchen right then. When the kids were in bed, it was their time to unlock the pantry and eat all the real food, the stuff we saw go in on days they went to the store, but never saw come back out.

I tiptoed past the bathroom and saw Cline leaning against a sink. His face was bright and sweaty. Myra sat in front of him on a stool, back to me. Our eyes met. She held out a white pill and he opened his mouth. She put the pill in. When he opened his mouth again it was gone. They did this three times before she stood. I scurried around the corner to watch her come out of the bathroom. She shut the door behind her, the household sign for occupied.

When I came back upstairs, I did my best to close my ears against the water sounds and groans coming from the bathroom.

Early morning, my room. Everyone was asleep, their open mouths snoring, hair matted against faces from the heat that kept on through the night. Something had woken me. It wasn't the train so I kept my eyes closed, hoping I'd fall back asleep. The room felt closer, more crowded than usual. I cracked my eye open. I started when I saw Cline's puffy, watery face above mine. I could have slapped him, would have slapped him, but he didn't look well.

"Sorry," he said in his non-whisper.

I realized I'd sat up, and fell back on my pillow. I closed my eyes again. "Go away," I said.

Instead he sat down. The whole mattress middle sank under his weight and my legs slid into his side. I squeezed my eyes shut harder.

He shifted and sighed, shifted and sighed. Once, he coughed and wheezed a little. Then sighed a little again. There was an odor each time he shifted, some slight sharp toilet smell.

"Big barn night coming up soon," he said after a few minutes.

I grunted and rolled over, tried to end the conversation before it started.

Sometimes there were big events. Myra and Evelyn would gather all the regulars and then some late one night and then there would be three or four fights going on, everyone grappling at once. The thumping from the other stalls bounced off the one you were in and amplified everything until it was so noisy you couldn't hear the blood pounding in your own head.

These events were planned days ahead of time, which only added to the dread.

I could hear Cline's heavy, sporadic breath. Then, "Myra's been trying to slim me down for it."

The night in the bathroom. He knew I'd seen. I popped open one eye. Studied him.

He picked at my sheets. "Tell me a story, Isabel. A train story."

I rolled my eyes at him but the truth was I wanted to tell one and I was a little glad he wanted to listen.

Then, right on schedule, the roar. No whistles, the train never whistled out there. The roar of it let us know.

I felt my mattress spring up. "See you in the barn," Cline said.

I kicked off the covers and headed out behind him.

It wasn't my day to fight, so I hung over the edge of the loft with the other kids, counted down, our singular voice blended with the guests'. Three, two, one.

They jumped and the fight began like they all did. Hands and feet crossed and disappeared. It was hard to tell where which kid started and another one ended at any moment. The smell of humid hay and horse manure, the scene's constant companions, grew stronger as the kids kicked around in the stall.

A leg flung out wide and knocked loose the stall door. No one relatched it, the adults too eager to see how their bets turned out, and those of us above too scared to interfere. The kids below struggled on, delivering blows to each other's faces and chests.

The horse wandered into the barn, like he did sometimes. He liked people, and sniffed the visitors' pockets, hoping someone had brought him something.

When no one paid him attention, he would wander out again.

One of the smaller kids in the loft elbowed his neighbor and pointed. "It's Rebel," he mouthed. It lightened our mood to see him there. But that day Rebel wanted in his stall. He nudged the door, and I felt a lump get large in the back of my mouth. The door swung in a few inches, then thunked back on its frame. Rebel nudged again. It opened further. No one did anything. The adults' eyes were wide and they yelled harder. It struck me they wanted the horse to get in with the scrambling kids, to see what would happen then. Rebel nudged the frame hard, and got his torso inside, his middle caught between door and stall.

The flurry of hands and feet and arms, lashing out haphazard in such a small space, the movement of it spooked him. He tried to back up, but the door caught him and he panicked. His ears came so close I could have touched them and I saw his legs raised, pawing the air. His frightened whinny echoed in the loft. It sent a shiver of fear through me so strong I thought it must have been made up of everyone else's too. The rest of the world zoomed away from me except the horse's hooves coming down. As they connected, I heard a muffled sickening crunch and followed the hooves down to the floor. One of the bigger boys, Ron with the bad haircut. Mouth open, his eyes wide, his face rolling side to side. At his hairline I saw red and made myself look away. Then the screaming sounds of the world poured back in on top of me.

I ran down ahead of the other kids. Men and women scurried out the barn door, bets off and forgotten. Engines revved outside, not starting fast enough for the frantic owners. Gusts of dust blew in the barn from vehicles going as fast as the wheels would take them on the parched dirt drive.

"Children are so resilient, Evelyn was telling one of the lingering guests as she pushed him outside. "I'm sure he'll be just fine."

She shut the eight-foot barn doors behind him. Light shifting in from spaces between boards made her expression, her grit teeth, just visible. "Get the doctor. Now. And keep your mouths shut." She hissed it through the spaces in her teeth.

Cline found me in the field. I faced the treeline and the sunset, away from the house. His light touch startled me. I didn't think anyone knew it was a place to go, let alone that I went out there. I thought about turning away again. I was out there to be alone. Instead I asked, "How is he? How's Ron?"

Cline shook his head. He sat down and leaned back on his arms.

I bent forward with my arms around my knees, breathed slow all the air from my lungs. For a minute, it made the world seem stable underneath me. I watched my canvas birds for so long they turned back into the abstract scraps they'd been at the start, my mind no longer making sense of their loose shapes.

"The big barn event is still on," Cline said. His voice sounded pulled from him, like someone was forcing him to say something he would never say otherwise.

We sat a long time with no words. The sky darkened. High pitched chirping and low croaks crescendoed in the woods. I let the noise drown out my thoughts. I was on the edge of sleep when I heard Cline's voice, and I couldn't be sure at first that's what I had heard. He looked like he had before, hands behind him, staring the opposite direction of me at the house.

"Isabel," he said, and I knew that's what I'd heard the first time. I sat up.

"I think it's time for a new train story."

I knew what he meant, had known for a while it would be the only way out.

"When the train comes in tomorrow night," he said.

I nodded, finished his sentence. "We jump it."

We would act like we were going to the barn, then slip into the dark and onto the train and be out of town faster than our mothers could run.

"It'll still be going pretty slow when it gets here," Cline said.

"Even if it's not, I'm getting on," I said. "I'm not scared. It's that or stay here and get kicked in the head."

We watched the lights in the house go off early, except the one on the very top floor that always stayed on because Myra didn't like sleeping in the dark. No one noticed we weren't there.

"What about the others?" The long piece of grass Cline chewed bobbed up and down in the dim light.

"That's up to them," I said. "If they follow they follow. If they don't—" I paused, pulled a handful of weeds up by the roots. "That's up to them."

"Myra and Evelyn will just find more kids," Cline said.

That might have been true, but maybe not. There was such a careful balance to the way we lived in that place, the relationship we had with our mothers. As I slid into bed, quiet in my too-quiet room, something told me it couldn't continue if Cline and I were gone.

Sometime late afternoon, the cold air blew in. In a breath, the day went from a warm wet blanket to a cool pillow. I stood in the kitchen with the windows open to the field.

A gush of chilly wind blew my hair straight back. Trash swept up in the yard, made a circle in the breeze before it skittered across the grass.

The others were noisy at dinner, feeling better in the cool down. Like Rebel in the barnyard, they were rejuvenated by the crisp damp air. The horse raced up and down his fence, his hooves making heavy sounds against the packed dirt ground. I felt a second from jumping out of my skin, but I kept my head down. Evelyn was distracted, and I caught her more than once staring at Ron's chair. I did too. It was so empty. It was hard to look away. I hadn't seen Myra all day.

"Get some rest," Evelyn said as the others got up, chairs scraping against my nerves. "Train comes in at 2 am."

I looked at Cline who nodded once.

I lay in bed those hours pretending to sleep. Everyone pretended to sleep. The dark clouds that rolled in with the cool air stayed. There were no stars that night.

Around 1 am, the roar. Deafening, it drowned out thoughts and sleep and peace. Rhythm full of steam and weight. The train was early. My heart jumped and my stomach turned soft.

I got up with the others, calm at first. I tried to keep it slow. But my pounding heart jumpstarted my legs, and I ran out in front of the others in the hall. I pulled far ahead of them, and Cline was right behind me. I could hear his heavy breath, could tell his nerves had broken too.

On the stairs, I heard our mothers yelling something indistinct from the top floor, and I realized if I went fast enough it would be possible to make it onto the train before they even got outside.

I picked up speed. My legs moved faster than I'd ever felt them move.

Cline wasn't behind me anymore. I turned back. He stood at the foot of the stairs, listening, his eyes wide.

"Don't let them scare you," I yelled. I kept moving to the door.

His mouth moved like a fish's, twitching open and closed. He might have made a sound, but the roar drowned it out.

He tried again. "Isabel, stop." The sound was tiny, but the strain in his voice told me he was yelling. I did stop, and stared, unbelieving. He was going to ruin our chance. It was just a story to him, something to talk about. I slammed out the door and into the yard.

A column of dust churned in front of me. Before I could scream, the wind blew up. It stole my breath and threw me into the vortex.

Large chunks of metal darted around inside. Some left the column with a hiss, flying off toward the earth. It was so quiet, the roar barely audible inside the spinning cloud. Large bursts of lightning lit the inside like a flickering bulb. My arms and legs floated to the sides. Each time the cyclone caught them, tried to drag me down by a limb so it could spit me out the bottom. I wasn't ready to hurtle faster than a car into the open country and I fought the downward pull the best I could, kicking and thrashing. All the time the metal whizzed around me. It was thick and wavy and I recognized it from a shed a couple miles down the road. Sharp pieces sliced into my thrashing arms and legs. I was surprised it didn't hurt more than it did. In a lightning flash, I saw my arm hiss from the blurry sides of the twister and into the dark outside. I felt lighter.

The tornado floated me toward its bowl-shaped top. Up there were papers, pieces of clothes. I saw parts of the barn and house then, too. Boards and bed frames banged into each other near the ground. I saw the tree line untouched, the starless sky. I kicked my legs, but looking down I saw I had no legs to kick. I watched the sharp metal chunks swirl where they should have been. I focused on the circular opening overhead. I was almost in the clouds.

The storm moved on. I heard the tornado whistling in the distance. Below, under white curved roads and square gradients of harvest fields, the land rose and fell. A tight grid of houses expanded from the middle. The borders were drawn. Train tracks west, small city north. The river twisted to the south, reflected sharp against the shadowy voids of surrounding trees. All around, a blue wash, glowing soft against what was left of me like moonlight, although that night there was no moon.