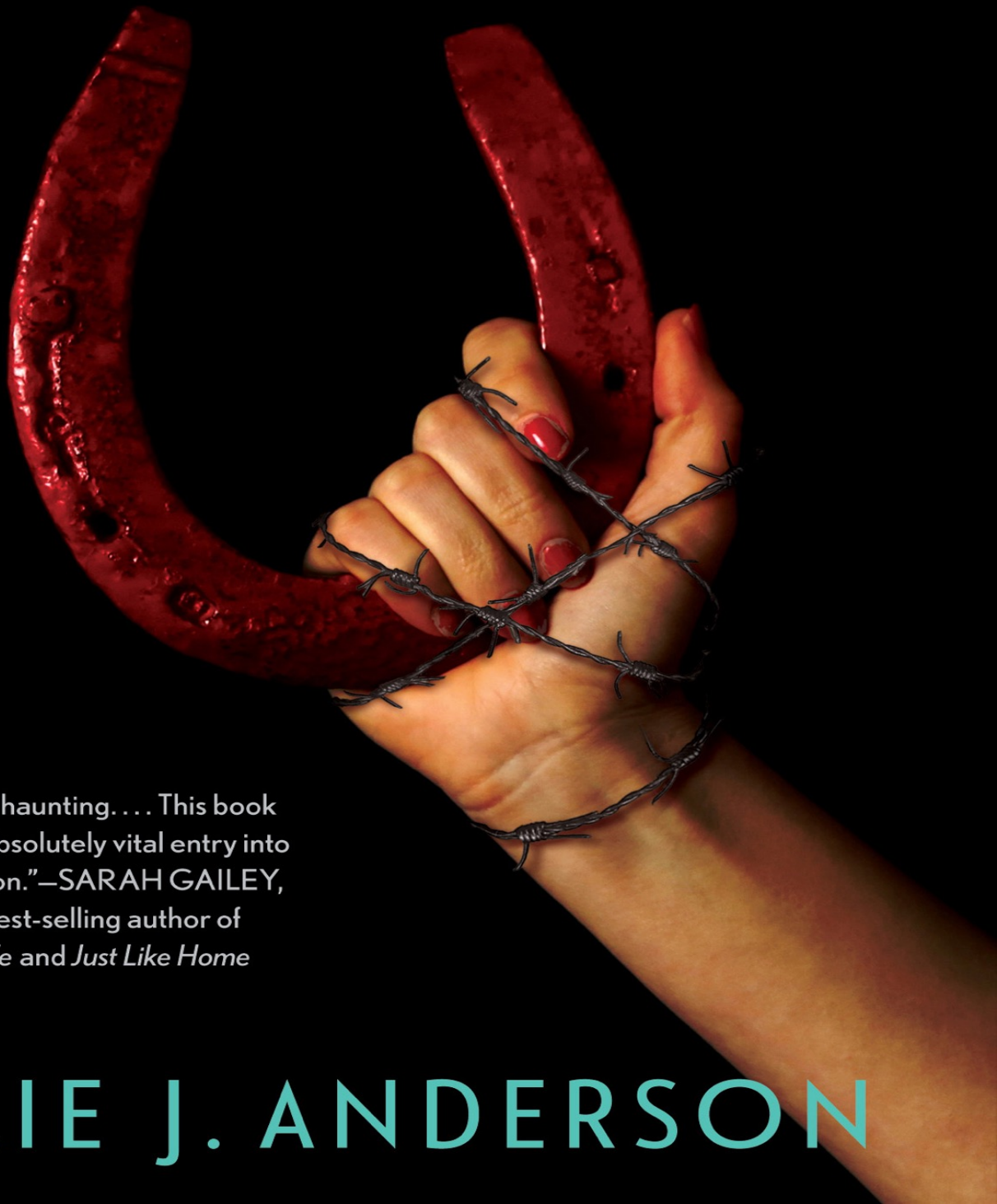


THE UNMOTHERS

a novel



"Exquisite and haunting. . . . This book represents an absolutely vital entry into the horror canon."—SARAH GAILEY, nationally best-selling author of *The Echo Wife* and *Just Like Home*

LESLIE J. ANDERSON

THE UNMOTHERS

a novel

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This is a work of fiction. All names, places, and characters are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to real people, places, or events is entirely coincidental.

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**TO MY HUSBAND, JAROD, AND SON, ARTHUR
YOU ARE THE SUNSHINE OF MY LIFE**

**TO MRS. DOBRY, WHO TOLD ME
I COULD BE A WRITER IN FIFTH GRADE
AND CURSED ME FOREVER THANK YOU**

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Myths about horses begin with the sea, but there is no sea near Raeford. There are small, wandering creeks and the Narrow Bone River, but no sea. So Raeford's horses must have come from somewhere else, not fighting out of the waves but wandering out of the dark forests, rising from the pine needles, tumbling down like ripe apples from the branches. It was easy to believe, if you stood on one of the sagging porches and looked over the dark pastures and forests, that the place had some of the terrible, pounding magic of the sea. The heartlessness of the sea. Dark creatures hid in the coves and shallows of its wild places like hungry eels stitched into the reefs. The blackness of midnight was heavier there, thicker, and smelled like ozone and decay. It felt like it was on the edge of creation or destruction.

That was one reason why, on the night of June twenty-first, Agatha Bently's first reaction when she heard an infant's cries carry over those fields, through that gloomy miasma, was surprise, and then fury and then resignation. This thing had happened before and would happen again. She rose and pulled on her boots and headed to the barn, where she was needed.

Something had been born, unexpected, the salt of the sea in its lungs. It screamed and screamed and it lived.

CHAPTER 1

MARSHALL

Carolyn Marshall wanted a cigarette so bad it made her chest hurt. She kept pulling the pack out of her duffel bag and selecting a cigarette before she remembered that she was on a bus, and there was no smoking on the bus. The woman across the aisle from her kept glaring, as if Marshall would start smoking right then and there, and wasn't simply at the mercy of her tattered, tremulous nerves. Everything seemed harder these days, and Marshall just wanted a smoke. She set the unlit cigarette in her mouth and pulled the tabloid out of the side pocket of her bag.

The front page had a large picture of three white people standing with a horse in a muddy pasture. The horse looked concerned, or so Marshall guessed. She didn't have much experience with horses, but she could see the hard, arched muscles in its neck, as if it was wincing as the photo was taken. Two women were standing near the horse's head, looking toward the camera, their frowning faces carved deeply.

Between them was a young man—a teenager, gawky, tall, and thin, holding a baby. Marshall couldn't see the teenager's face, because it was blurred, as if he'd suddenly looked downward just as the picture was taken, unable to look away from the infant long enough for the photographer to do their work. The baby, for its part, existed only as a bundle of blankets and a single fist held in the air.

The headline read *Horse Gives Birth to Healthy Baby Boy*.

She'd read the article, a two-page spread with pictures of the town, the baby, and the horse, and another blurry photo of the young man. It looked like he had posed for a moment and then regretted it, trying to duck out of frame. There might have been other, better photos, but the tabloid selected this one for a reason. This one made him look shifty. It made him look

guilty. It went perfectly with the caption below it: *The Proud Father, Roswell Bently*.

The article was vague. Did the boy fuck the horse? Did he find an abandoned infant he was now strangely claiming as his own? Was it his child with some now-absent girl and this strange story was their cover? The article drew no conclusions, quoted only *a local man* and *a local high schooler*. Marshall immediately knew the writer had made up at least parts of the quotes, judging from the nearly story-perfect wording, but she couldn't fault him too much. Sometimes you just wanted to finish the article and leave.

She flipped back to the cover and looked at Roswell. Her mission was to get an interview with him—find the story if there was one. She already hated the whole ordeal. It wasn't the sort of thing she usually covered. It wasn't even the sort of thing her newspaper covered, but this was her punishment. This was limbo. Or it was worse than that, the option she could not fully consider—this was a gift. This was pity. They were forcing her to take some time away. If she was very good and toed the line everything would work out and she could come home, and everyone could forget that she'd lost her mind for a little while.

She crushed the paper, stuffed it and the unsmoked cigarette back in her bag, then pressed her face against the cool window and dozed as the bus rumbled toward Raeford. She'd read about the little town. There was nothing particularly surprising—high unemployment after one factory shut down and the other downsized, high opioid overdose and maternal mortality death rates, an average age that was creeping higher and higher as more young people moved away. Raeford's only claims to fame were a thriving horse breeding industry and as the birthplace of the “world-renowned” short-distance runner Henry Rodgers, who died in 2010 in a car accident/suspected suicide.

The bus finally hissed to a stop as the small, electronic sign switched from *South Grayton* to *Raeford*. Marshall gathered her bag and was down the stairs before she realized they were not in a town at all. There was

nothing but a bus stop sign on the side of an empty road, identical to the miles of road they'd already traveled.

"What the hell?" she said, then turned and slapped her hand against the closing door of the bus. "Hey! What the hell?"

"What?" the driver said, opening the door halfway.

"Where's the town?"

"Ten minutes that way. Take the first turn. There ain't a stop in town."

"Are you serious? Why is there a stop here?"

"Halfway between Millersport and Raeford," the driver said, then closed the door the rest of the way.

Marshall caught a glimpse of the woman who had been sitting across from her, looking a little too self-satisfied, as if Marshall was being punished for the cigarette. Her only other option was to get back on the thrice-damned bus and go home, but she wasn't sure she'd have a job if she did that, and if she didn't have a job she'd lose the apartment, and of course there were the medical bills. She crushed her jaws together so hard she thought her teeth might crack, and took a step back from the bus as it pulled away.

It was drizzling, a fact that hadn't bothered her a moment before and now infuriated her. She turned her collar up, diverting the drizzle down her neck, and started walking. She stumbled off the asphalt onto the liminal space of the shoulder. There was trash mixed in with the gravel, bones too, and hair. She saw a deer lying dead on the side of the road and realized she would have to pass by it, close enough to see its gore. Its legs were broken, and its neck was at a wrong angle. Its torso had ballooned with gasses and its black eyes were still looking toward the forest, which it either did not reach or did not fully escape.

Dead animals often stirred a level of sadness in her that surprised her. It was a personal issue. She had a habit of distancing herself from subjects, from humans, seeing them as plotlines and character quirks and eye colors. All motivations were understandable, dissectible, judgeable—but animals had no deep reasons. There was no *ulterior* to the things they did. The deer

crossed the road because it wanted to cross the road and then it died. There was nothing to make sense of in that. She leaned over the corpse.

It was sitting in a puddle and the maggots were climbing through it, trying to escape the water that was slowly, slowly rising around them. The sight was mesmerizing in a way that was a cousin to beautiful and to horrifying, but not quite either. Marshall felt goose bumps rise on her arms. She suddenly wished she had some sage, a half-joke with herself and a ghost. Joseph once brought a bundle of the herb home and set it on the kitchen counter. It was pale and tied tightly with white string. She'd poked the bundle with her cell phone as Joseph started the dishes.

"You cooking something with this?" she asked.

"No, it's sage, for purity," Joseph said.

"Oh, Joe."

Joseph held up a finger, the threat of an old fight that did not need rehashing.

"It's not going to hurt you, not one little bit. Just let me have this."

"You're going to make the whole house smell like smoke. I'd rather have ghosts."

"There's no such thing as ghosts."

Marshall didn't ask what, exactly, he was trying to chase away if not ghosts.

Sometimes she came home and smelled smoke and said nothing.

Sometimes it made her feel warm and welcome.

The sudden surge of cold that followed that thought was like rainwater in her shoes. It was worse than the maggots, and Marshall felt like she might be sick, so she set her eyes straight ahead and walked on.

Finally, she found the turn, a crumbling asphalt road descending toward a Pizza Hut, which glowed as a beacon of warmth and human civilization. She considered stopping in and stuffing as much warm cheese and grease down her throat as she could, but she knew she'd better just get to the hotel before her energy gave out. Her back hurt. She felt blisters burning into being on her heels.

She passed a video rental place that was inexplicably still in business, advertising a kids' movie starring a talking kangaroo and also an *adults-only room*. Several other storefronts had no sign indicating what they sold. She supposed if you lived in town, you just knew. A farm supply store glowed like a lighthouse in the gloom. There were three different pickup trucks and a horse trailer outside. The whole town had a tired feeling, as if it had been worn thin. There was nothing ugly about it, but it needed things—new streetlights and potholes filled and planters of flowers.

The only place that seemed open was a liquor store called *Lucky Horse Shoe Spirits and Beer*, with bright, golden windows and several cars in the parking lot. Marshall made a mental note.

The Sunshine Corral Hotel wasn't far from the main road. It was small and gray. The paint was chipping off the stucco and the rusty air conditioners squatted behind dying boxwood bushes. Marshall had written a story on the boxwood blight a year before. It was spreading south across the state with alarming speed, threatening to wipe out the entire species across the US if it couldn't be quarantined. This whole row would be dead in a few months. A real shame.

Marshall waited as the lethargic automatic doors parted for her, making a sad, sticky noise. The ponytailed girl at the front desk looked up with a perfunctory smile.

"Carolyn Marshall," she said, setting her duffel bag at her feet.

"Oh, yeah. We've got you here," the girl said. There was a bit of accent in her voice from somewhere just a little farther south. "Five nights?"

That caught her off guard. The office assistant had made the reservation. Carlos, her editor, gave her the assignment. Why would they send her on such a ridiculous story for so long? *To heal*, she thought cynically, and that revelation made her furious. She didn't need to be coddled, and the very idea that they had planned this behind her back made her want to spit on the floor and go back home.

She pulled out her phone and was halfway through typing *Look here, asshole*, when she remembered the bus stop was so far away, and it was raining.

Fuck, she should have rented a car.

“There’s no smoking in the room,” the girl said, holding out the key card.

“Of course,” Marshall said.

She dropped her bag in her room and went right back out. The room had felt instantly claustrophobic, too yellow and too blue, the furniture worn thin from other people’s worrying. There was a tear near the light switch and she couldn’t stop thinking about a stranger’s hand breaking through the wallpaper.

The town was built in a valley, surrounded by what were not quite mountains. *Cliffs*, she might call them. *Hills* seemed inadequate to describe their scale. They towered above her, above the Pizza Hut and the little hotel, making the gray sky seem small and cut off too suddenly. It felt like standing in the bottom of a snow globe. The trees on the tops of these cliffs were old, Marshall thought, and too tall, twisting toward the limited sky. There were no trees like that where she came from. The trees that lined her street were small and ornamental. They flowered pink in spring. These were the great-great-grandfathers of those trees. She felt that, if the cliffs themselves crumbled away, these trees would still stand, inexplicably, dangling in the sky.

She could see horses on the crest of one of the cliffs with riders on their backs. Three of them, all black with riders in black. They stood shadowed by one particularly large dead tree and seemed to stare down at her, though they probably hadn’t seen her at all. Their stillness was unnerving. She kept waiting for them to turn, to move on—at least to stamp their hooves or swish their tails, but they just stood, like sentinels, until she turned away and walked toward the liquor store.

There were a few old men milling inside, looking mostly at the bottom shelf as if they were meditating on their own shoes. They all looked up as she walked in, and the lines on their faces deepened. The man at the counter looked like he was in the middle of practicing a card trick. He held the king of diamonds above the counter, dangling upside down between two fingers.

Marshall let the door shut behind her as he very slowly looked her up and down.

“You here for the show?”

“I’m sorry?” Marshall said.

Was that a pickup line? No one smiled. It did not have the crack of a dirty joke.

“Horse show,” one of the old men offered.

“Oh. No. Just browsing.”

“We’re closed,” the magician said.

“Pretty full up for being closed.”

“I’m just letting these guys finish up and then I’m locking the door.”

“Kinda early.”

“I don’t know what to tell you. We’re closed.”

“Go on!” one of the old men added.

Marshall wanted to fight. She’d been in the mood to fight for hours, for days, maybe for weeks. The fight boiled like a cauldron inside her, filling her whole body with heady fumes. But she also didn’t see a victory here. There was nothing here she truly wanted to win, not even a moral victory. So she shook her head and left, hearing the playing card flip back to life as the door closed slowly on its rusted spring.

Again, she considered cursing Carlos out for sending her to this shithole, but he was probably already in bed, and she wanted to yell at him directly.

There was a small restaurant on the corner, slightly less battered than the rest of the town, which was a very low bar to clear. The sign might have once said *Serra’s* but now it flickered *era* at a mostly empty parking lot. A bell on the corner of the door jingled as Marshall walked in. The place smelled like coffee and sawdust and burned cooking oil. A bit of smoke curled against the ceiling like a cat on a heater. Maybe it was from the oil, or just the memory of a time when the booths were full and cigarettes hung from patrons’ mouths like a pleasant *good morning*.

The lone waitress looked up from where she was tending a coffee machine behind a low counter. She set a hand absentmindedly on her

pregnant stomach and arched a dark eyebrow at Marshall. Her name tag said *Mary Carter* in half-smudged marker with a smiley face sticker over the first *a*. A large, gold cross hung around her neck. She smiled in that way that only lifelong service workers could, communicating a vague welcome to anyone who came in but also a thin sense of fatigue. The smile seemed to say *You're welcome here as long as you behave yourself*. Marshall gave the woman a nod that, she hoped, communicated *I completely understand and won't be any trouble at all*. Then she took a seat at the counter.

There were two other customers in the place, eating together—an older man in a faded, turquoise polo shirt and a young man in a black hoodie. The older man gave her a smile that managed to be both welcoming and suspicious. The young man, on the other hand, followed his tablemate's gaze and gave Marshall a look that quickly swung from suspicious to disdainful. Marshall gave the two of them the same nod.

Completely understand.

No trouble at all.

The waitress leaned on the counter, not bothering to hide her exhaustion, though the creases at the corners of her eyes suggested someone used to smiling who simply didn't do that so much anymore.

"Call me Carter. What can I get you?" she asked.

"I'll have a coffee and the uh...Big Dave Breakfast," Marshall said, pushing the sticky menu back into its place under the napkin holder.

She glanced down at the woman's round stomach and subconsciously touched her own—empty. She dragged her eyes back up to the woman's face.

"Sounds good," the waitress said. "You in for the night?"

"The week," Marshall said, "for work."

"For the horse show?"

Marshall considered lying, given what had happened at the liquor store, but decided against it.

"Nope. Other stuff."

"Long time."

"Well, you know how bosses are."

The waitress nodded and left. Marshall had found that pretty much anyone would forgive her for being somewhere *for work*. It was understandable, at least. Often, even if you made them furious, that *for work* would get you asked to leave instead of punched in the teeth. Not that she thought the waitress would punch her in the teeth, but you never knew.

There was a flyer taped to the counter, every three or four seats, printed on a horribly bright neon-green paper with a badly xeroxed photo of a cowboy roping a cow from horseback. The flier read *4-H Western Region Finals*, followed by dates and a grainy map. The horse show, she assumed. Marshall took a picture with her phone. It might be an interesting place for interviews if she needed anything extra before she left.

She immediately felt queasy at the thought. This wasn't a real assignment, and it didn't deserve the dignity of being treated like one. This was a Band-Aid, an excuse to get her out of the office until she could get her shit back together, or to see if that was something she simply wouldn't be able to do anymore, and if so to communicate the fact that it was time for her to move on to something more stable, like tightrope walking. No, she needed to send a decisive message that she was fine, thank you very much, and their concern was misplaced. She just needed to write a few passable lines, take some shitty pictures, then get the hell out of this crappy little town.

She turned at the sound of footsteps on tile and saw the old man coming toward her. He had his hand up, ready to shake. Marshall found herself already turning and taking it, as if he had moved her with magnetism.

"John Daily," he said.

"Marshall," she answered.

"You in for the night?" Daily said.

"The week," Marshall said, "for work."

"Well, how 'bout that?" Daily said. "And what is work, Ms. Marshall?"

"Reporting, generally," Marshall said. "For the *Gazette*, though I've been known to garden."

Daily laughed, right on cue. He was following a careful script, taking stock of Marshall and giving her measured information in return. It was not

quite a dance, but something less choreographed and more rote—marching, perhaps. Step-by-step the expected mannerisms fell into place.

Marshall leaned slightly, looking around the man at the boy he'd left in the booth. He'd turned to watch them, pitched forward like a dog that had spotted a rabbit. He was practically vibrating, ready for something, hoping for it—radiating violence like a fever. She looked back at Daily.

"Can I ask what a big-city reporter like you is doing all the way out here?" Daily asked. "No, let me guess, opioid crisis."

She didn't think of herself as *big city*, but she supposed anything was bigger than Raeford.

"Is that a common story around here?" Marshall asked. Answering a question with a question was the oldest reporter's trick in the book. It was second nature to her now.

"It's just about the only thing they talk about when they come," the man said. He did not specify who *they* were. "Take pictures of the empty houses and kids sitting on stoops and write about how sad it is that we're all dying of opioids. Just so sad. Nothing to be done."

"Nah, that's not what I'm here about," Marshall said. "I could have stayed home to write about that."

"It's bad all over," Daily agreed.

Marshall gave a nod that was more like a bow, an acknowledgment of the statement and the weight of it. For just a moment, Daily looked uncomfortable. She barely caught it, like seeing a bird take wing between tree branches. The boy behind him flinched, like a fighter ready to parry. It was hard not to lean away from the two of them.

She wondered if she made them uncomfortable. She was a big woman, and made no attempt at being pretty. Her hair was short and often uncombed, and she didn't bother with makeup. She was bitterly comfortable inside her own body in a way women often weren't, and sometimes that unsettled people.

"I'm here to talk to Roswell Bently," Marshall said.

"Ah," Daily said, his face stiffening. "That's the other reason."

This was an intelligent man, she thought out of nowhere, a dangerous man. She didn't believe he wanted to do her harm, only that he was capable of it and, more importantly, willing to do it. Or maybe he did want to do her harm but had calculated that it was not yet the time. It was not yet advantageous to him. It's not that he would take pleasure in it, in the same way he wouldn't take pleasure in digging a ditch. It would be a chore—a necessity. She had met men like him before and she trusted her instinct. He was a big fish in a small pond who, instead of leaving to find a place to grow, simply decided to take advantage of his size and devour whatever he pleased and crush the rest under his bulk.

She would have to be careful that she left before that happened to her.

"The story's captured the imagination, I guess," Marshall said. "So we just wanted to give it a paragraph, a mention. Get a quote from the boy. I might stick around for the fair, though." She tapped the flier taped to the counter.

"You'll be nice to that family," he said. "Some folks came to drag their name through the mud, but you seem like a good girl. You'll treat them right." He said it firmly, an order.

"Of course," she agreed.

"Because, you know, little town like this, people get froggy and got nothing better to do but jump."

Marshall wasn't sure she understood what exactly was being threatened, but she did understand that this was a threat.

"Got it."

"Good. Good! Now, you need anything while you're in town, you let me know," he said with a broad, false smile. "You find me."

"I'll do that."

They shook hands again and the man left, shadowed by the younger boy. Daily held a hand behind the boy's back, almost affectionately, protectively, guiding him toward the exit without touching him. It was still menacing, though, not quite a symbol of love—a gentle threat.

"What's he on?" Marshall asked the waitress when she set the plates in front of her. "The boy I mean."

“Who knows,” Carter said. Then, quickly, she added, “He’s a good kid, just a little lost.”

Just a little lost.

It reminded Marshall of an incantation or a superstition. There was a scene stuck in her head from a novel she had read in high school, and she revisited it at odd times in her life. In the scene, the main characters, catching themselves talking too favorably of their child, immediately bow their heads and speak ill of him, hoping the spirits won’t take notice and steal the child away. It was like that, but in reverse.

“Real problem around here?” Marshall asked.

“Sure is,” Carter agreed.

Marshall made a noise to indicate sadness and the waitress put a hand on her hip.

“You really here to cover Roswell?”

Marshall felt that the question was a trap, so she put a forkful of pancakes in her mouth and nodded. The pancakes were very good.

“You want a ride?” the waitress asked.

The invitation came as a surprise. She hadn’t expected either kindness or accommodation, and certainly not assistance. She quickly swallowed her pancakes.

“That would be very kind.”

The waitress grunted, as if to indicate that kindness wasn’t necessarily her motivation.

“It’s best if I keep an eye on you, and I was going out there anyway. I’m leaving at six on my way to church. Get it over with and get you out of town.”

“Deal,” Marshall said.

“That’s a.m.”

“That’s fine.”

“And like Daily said, you better be nice.”

“Cross my heart,” Marshall said.

The walk back to the hotel was shockingly dark. The few streetlights seemed too far apart, and no light came from the locked and shuttered

storefronts. Even the farm supply store was reduced to a single sickly yellow sign above the front door. The light barely made it across the parking lot. The air buzzed with heat and insects and the leftover humidity from the rain. The whole town seemed to seethe and steam.

She was relieved to stumble into the thin, cold air of the hotel lobby. She was even more relieved to shut the door of her room behind her. The room was still stifling, still too small, and yet she felt safer inside it.



The noise did not grow, but simply commenced—a cry, monstrous and high-pitched—a whining scream that cut through her sleep like a knife through tissue. Marshall was awake so suddenly she got all the way out of bed and was standing beside the battered bedside table, shaking with adrenaline and slick with night sweats, before she could even fully process what was happening. It sounded like a creature screaming inside her room, a wounded or trapped animal. She reached, slowly, for the lamp, because the thing could be right next to her, could be on her bedside table, could bite her or climb up her leg with needle-sharp little claws. She cursed herself for leaving the bed and its illusion of safety.

She flipped on the bedside lamp and the sudden light blinded her for a moment, but the room was empty. Her mind slowly, sluggishly freed itself from the tar pit of panic. She was, for now, safe. That realization didn't wash away the sound, though, the keening cry, which seemed louder in the yellow light. Still shaking, Marshall learned toward the wall and cocked her head, like a hunting dog. There it was, the skittering sound of clawed feet on wood, and then the noise again, the terrified howling of a small mammal, trapped and panicking. She felt relieved and then intensely angry, though the anger was impotent and directionless. Who could she be angry at? The hotel? The creature? The wall? But she was. She was angry enough to put her fist through the wall and drag the animal out herself.

She stomped to the phone and dialed zero for the desk.

“Sunshine Corral Hotel. How can I help you?” said a bored voice on the other end.

“Yeah, hi,” Marshall said. “There’s something screaming in the wall.”

She paused there, wondering if she should clarify what she wanted the hotel to do about it. It seemed pretty obvious, didn’t it?

“Oh, yeah, we know,” the bored voice said. “We got someone on the way, but it might be a bit.”

“Can I move rooms?” Marshall asked, raising her voice over another wave of screeching.

“We’re full up,” the girl said.

“Full up?”

“For the fair and the show,” she said. “Lot of people come from out of town.”

Marshall cursed and looked at the wall, where the thing screamed behind the wallpaper.

“So there’s nothing you can do?”

“We did call someone,” the girl said.

“Great,” Marshall said. “Thanks.”

“I’m sorry about it,” the girl offered. “If it makes you feel better, almost every other room has called too.”

“It doesn’t,” Marshall said.

She dropped the phone back on the hook, and then, unsatisfied with the noise it made, picked it up and slammed it back down. The animal went on crying.

“Would you shut up? We all know you’re here,” she said—to no one, because the creature couldn’t hear her and, if it could, her voice would only panic it further. “Grow the fuck up and stop crying about it.”

The faded yellow armchair was the farthest thing from the wall, and Marshall reasoned that it would be quieter over there. It wasn’t, of course, but somehow sleeping in the bed, directly under the skittering and whining thing, seemed unconscionable.

God, she hated this place.

She slept very little, awakened by the occasional scrabbling and crying in the walls. Walking this uncomfortable line between consciousness and sleep, she floated through the rest of the night. In the morning, she remembered, vaguely, sitting beside the window, her head in her hands. Dazed and exhausted, she had looked out the window down into the dark street she'd walked just hours before and made out, barely, a massive, writhing wave in the main road. Her first impression was that it was a snake, as wide as the asphalt, making its way deeper into town, wriggling under the few streetlights, black as pitch and silent. But as she stared the image became many creatures, a herd of them, hundreds, making their way through the streets. One of them turned to look up at her, a horse, black as the ones she had seen on the hill, all black, deep black, looking up at her with a single, sharp eye.

She must have been asleep. And in the morning when the alarm went off she woke to a room that was silent and bright. She'd forgotten to turn off the lamp.

CHAPTER 2

ROSWELL

Roswell woke when the baby cried. He let the noise go on for a few moments, feeling the comfort of his bed in a way he swore he'd never felt it before—with a yearning, a hunger. The tired went through to his bones, he thought, and then bled out the other side. It was layers of tired, like a stack of tissue paper half a mile thick, suffocating him. It was hard to imagine he would ever feel something besides that. He was sixteen years old and already he felt like an ancient thing, worn down by too much time and contact with the oxidizing air. Finally, he stood and went to the baby, before his mother could rise and scream at them both.

The crib was in his room, a pile of clothes shoved under it, including his absent father's high school track sweatshirt, several pairs of socks, and a pacifier that had somehow escaped. There were little tumbleweeds of dust on the faded navy carpet and a few empty or mostly empty bottles of Mountain Dew. Sometimes he felt a little flash of fear when he saw these things, even though they were far beyond the baby's grasp. He had a quick vision of the track sweatshirt suffocating the baby, who flailed, who cried, who was still.

"Hello, Phillip," he whispered to the baby, who did not respond except to continue to cry.

He was careful when he lifted the baby, so the calluses on his hands didn't scrape the boy's soft, new skin. He warmed the bottle in the very small, yellow kitchen while the baby cried in his ear. Out the window he could see the horses gathering at the fence to be let in for breakfast. The new gelding was *too big for his britches*, as his mom said, and was biting at the mares, nipping at them and then thrusting his head high in the air as if to say, *What? No, it wasn't me at all!* Rosie bucked at him, but took pity and

only bounced halfway up. A warning. Next time he would get hooves, sharp and hard as hammers. The gelding bounced away, overdramatic as always.

Roswell smiled as the baby took the bottle, a careful smile, like a fox peering out of a den to see if the dogs are gone.

“Ros, you out yet?” his mother yelled.

“No, Mom. I’m on my way.”

“Get going. I’ll take the lump.”

Roswell looked at the baby, hoping that it would reach for him or coo or cry when he tried to move away. He wanted the baby to want him and not his mother, but the truth was the baby couldn’t really tell them apart at this point. Any warm body with food would do. The doctor said the baby couldn’t even see his face yet, which had shocked Roswell. So many things about babies shocked him. They seemed like entirely different creatures than the adults they grew into. They might as well be squirrels. He might have better instincts for the care and feeding of squirrels. It had been a month since the doctor told him the thing about sight, though, so maybe it was different now. The baby didn’t reach for him, and he heard his mother dressing in the next room, so he pulled his coat on and went out.

The mist lay over the fields, cool and gentle. The sudden absence of his son’s cries was like a physical assault on his ears. It was a shock, worse than the noise. It would be back, he knew. Sometimes he would be out in the field or in class and hear the baby crying, even though he was far away and there was no way he could have heard it at all. *It happens*, his mom said once, *Parent instincts go haywire*. She did not elaborate. Once it happened while he was holding Phillip and he looked back and forth between the sleeping infant in his arms and the closed door of the nursery, where he was certain something was crying.

Roswell pulled on his mud boots slowly, watching the silver cloud roll over the cliffs and under the fences. The little double-wide mobile home lay on twenty acres, most of which was pastures. The house’s foundation leaked water and the windows leaked warmth and the faded siding was peeling away. The fence posts were rotten. The driveway was slowly being eroded by rain. The barn was marked with patches of rust like an

Appaloosa. In the war between civilization and the wilds, the property was already defecting to the enemy's side.

The land had been in their family for generations, always shrinking, sold away a half-acre at a time to stave off starvation, to pay debts, to keep the little house warm. There was another house, built by his great-great-great-grandfather from brick and stone—two stories, four bedrooms, two fireplaces—but it became difficult and then impossible to maintain and was crumbling away in the forest. The forest had come for it, as it came for the farm now—an enduring tradition.

The family had long ago moved out of the old house, leaving much of the furniture in place, as if they would one day come back to reclaim it. But the roof caved in and the floor gave way and now everything that was left there had turned black and rotted away. Roswell had played in and around it as a boy, and his mind lived, even now, halfway inside it. He could close his eyes and point to it, directly to the heart of its great main fireplace from wherever he was in the world. It was his true north, his magnetic center.

He opened the gate and let the horses run into the barn by themselves. This was the most dangerous moment of the morning in his mind, when the horses were absolutely and completely free. They could easily run down the driveway or off into the forest or scatter around the property, and he would have to spend the rest of the day gathering them up again. They never did, though. There was food out there, sure, but it wasn't honey-coated grain, and there was no warm stable, and no Roswell to pick stones out of their hooves, so they ran into the barn every time and put themselves in their stalls, waiting for him to feed them.

Or they just didn't know better. They were too tied into the habit and couldn't imagine anything outside of it. Perhaps their brains couldn't create the concept of freedom, or if the thought did occur to them, perhaps it was anathema to follow that thought to fruition. Maybe they were trapped and didn't know it.

Maybe they were just hungry.

Rosie bit at the gelding on her way through the door and he let her go first, throwing his head up in the air theatrically. It was normal, all normal

little spats between new neighbors, and Roswell wasn't too worried about it. He could imagine the gelding's owner being unhappy, though. He could picture her frowning at the nip on his side, a half-moon section of hair gone from his shoulder, wondering loud enough for him to hear if the gelding shouldn't be in his own paddock. The answer was *no*. The young horse would drive himself mad with loneliness if he didn't have someone to bother. Some people treated horses like they were made of glass.

And they were, sometimes. But that didn't mean—

He'd been standing outside too long, and Rosie started kicking at her stall, impatient and hungry.

The grain room was strung with flypaper like party streamers, littered with insectoid bodies. Their brothers and sisters buzzed around the ceiling, completely unaffected by the deaths in their families. The place smelled like dust and wood and sweat. He opened the grain bins and scooped the golden, sticky, sweet-smelling grain into six buckets, balancing them along his arms as he waddled down the barn aisle. The metal bands pressed furrows into his skin.

Every horse stomped, snorted, nickered as he fed them, as if this would speed him up. Rosie looked good, but horses recovered from birth faster than humans. His mother would want the vet to take another look anyway. Rosie didn't seem to miss her baby. She didn't even seem to notice it was missing. He hoped not, anyway. He didn't want her to suffer.

"He's doing good," he said, very quietly, barely breathing the word *good* by the time he got to it. He was embarrassed, and Rosie didn't even look up at him, which somehow embarrassed him more.

He checked their water, ran his hands along the pony's legs. He didn't feel any heat, which was good news—probably not an injury or infection. He'd felt something the day before, and the last thing he needed was a lame pony before the fair. The pony stomped as soon as he let go of her leg, always with the last word.

On his way back out, Roswell took a moment, standing in the doorway of the gelding's stall as the horse ate. The animal had been expensive, he knew, and looked it. New, young, hot, and impatient, with a red coat that

shone even under a layer of mud from the field. He was a completely different creature from the other horses in the small stable, who were still shedding spotty winter coats and moved with the grace of the old and grouchy. This horse, though—this was the kind of horse that got his riders points in the ring, just on his own polish, his own innate elegance.

Roswell knew it was only a matter of time before the gelding's owner took him out of their stable. It often went like that; a new owner brought their horse to Foxglove Farm because it was cheap and close to town, and Roswell's mother was a talented trainer, but not in the way that owners of magnificent horses wanted. His mother taught an old-fashioned style—the way to be a horseperson, confident in your own ability to ride any horse, your skills in balance and strength and patience applicable to any situation. She would teach you not to fall. She would teach you to understand the creatures, so much bigger and stronger than you. She would teach you how to speak to them and listen in return.

This is not what owners of horses like the gelding wanted. They wanted to take their beautiful horse to shows and have it carry them to victory. That was another style of teaching altogether, a more expensive style, a style that carved away at the horse like a soap doll until its shape was more pleasing. It made a soft and shallow animal, and the rider never really learned to ride, to communicate with the creature, to know it or understand it, only to sit upon it and keep their posture straight. He thought it a shame, but it depended on the way one saw a horse and its purpose.

He double-checked the locks on the doors and then went to change for church, though every inch of his body ached for sleep. At the door of the double-wide, he froze at the sound of tires and turned to face whatever new trial was coming for him.

A truck was pulling into the driveway, past the chipped, blue sign. He felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up as he walked up the driveway to meet it, shoving his hands deep into his pockets. He recognized the truck, but his hair stayed on end. His skin crawled.

"Hey Roswell," Mary Carter said as she climbed down from the driver's seat. "How's the little one?"

“He’s okay,” Roswell said, and shook Carter’s hand like his mother was watching.

“Is he sleeping at all?” she asked.

“Nah.”

“And how’s your mom holding up?”

“Oh, you know Mom.”

Carter laughed.

How are you feeling? Roswell thought, glancing at her round stomach. *I should ask her how she’s feeling*, but he didn’t.

Another woman got out of the truck, a thick person, built like a rectangle. She had on a turtleneck, jeans, and the type of featureless tennis shoes his mother wore. In fact, she looked like she was born from the same stock as his mother—a creature that persevered, endured, and waited for her moment to hit a problem like a battering ram. He could see the anger floating on the surface of her, like clotted milk. He shook her hand too.

“This is Marshall,” Carter said. “She’s here to do a story on the baby.”

There it was, the thing that made his hair stand on end. He looked down, imagined himself hiding in the muddy tire treads, sinking down into the wet cold of them. Carter and his mother had been friends before they’d been potty trained, and he wondered if time hadn’t built a bond that better sense would question. He knew Carter loved him like her own family, but sometimes she just did things like this—disruptive things—for no reason that he could see. *Shit stirrer*, his mother would say. It was a little like the gelding, always picking, always testing the waters.

“We got to go to church,” Roswell said.

“Yeah, true, true,” Carter said. “I’m sure Marshall won’t mind coming along.”

Marshall frowned for just an instant, but she recovered quickly and smiled. “Of course. If there’s a spot for me,” the thick woman said.

“Always room for more,” Carter said. “Go change, Ros. We’ll wait.”

Ros escaped into the house.

CHAPTER 3

MARSHALL

Carter and Marshall tried to make themselves comfortable in the driveway. The place smelled better than Marshall had expected. There was a note of manure, sure, but mostly it smelled like grass and wood chips and mud. It smelled like nature turned up to eleven, and there was something oddly comforting about that. Though Marshall had never been on a farm in her life, there was something about that smell that felt nostalgic.

“Am I going to be appropriate for church?” Marshall asked.

“They take all kinds,” Carter said. “Sleep well?”

“I did not. There was a possum in the wall.”

“Really? Honest to God?” Carter said, her hands on her hips, her pregnant belly thrust forward into the space between them.

“I swear. It scared the shit out of me.”

She wanted a cigarette, but the very-present belly wouldn’t allow it—wouldn’t even allow the question.

“That sucks, about the possum.”

“Sure. Lovely farm.”

“Yeah, it’s a good spot,” Carter said. “Farm’s been in the family six generations but who knows if Ros will get it, or want it.”

“Yeah?”

“Kids just don’t have the interest, you know. They all want to move away. I get it. There’s just not a lot to do here.”

Marshall made a noise of agreement, which usually encouraged people to go on, but Carter was done. Marshall wasn’t sure if she thought the moving away was good or not. She dragged her eyes across the lovely farm again and thought that she wouldn’t blame Ros one bit if he wanted to move

away. She'd move away. She'd run as fast as she could. "What do you think happened?" Marshall asked.

"He got some girl pregnant, panicked, made up a stupid story."

"Any idea which girl?"

"I couldn't guess," Carter said, which Marshall immediately understood to mean, *Yes, everyone knows*.

"So why the coverage?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. City's getting closer. Kids move away. Maybe someone had a job at that paper and a grudge against Agatha, or Ros, or his grandpa. Or maybe they were bored and said, *Hey, listen to this stupid story from the town I grew up in*."

The screen door clattered shut and the two women turned to see Roswell holding a car seat with all the care and attention of a man moving a box of dynamite. Standing beside him was a short, dirty-blond woman with a deep frown on her face. Three of her fingers and her nose were crooked, long broken and healed without the aid of a health care professional. Her hair was long and braided on top of her head with military precision. Marshall thought a single hair wouldn't dare escape that bun.

"What's this?" the woman said.

"Agatha, this is Marshall. She's here to write about the boys," Carter said, and Marshall heard a bit of a smile in her voice.

Was she a practical joke? Marshall felt a wave of frustration—at everyone, including herself. Mostly herself. She was usually better at understanding a situation before she wandered into it.

"Are you paying?" Agatha said. "We're not giving interviews for free."

"Mom—" Roswell whispered behind her.

Agatha held a hand up and Roswell looked down at the sleeping baby.

"I'm afraid my publication doesn't pay for interviews," Marshall said.

"Well then you can fuck off," Agatha said.

"Mom," Roswell said, quieter this time.

"He can't fucking understand swear words yet, Ros, and when he can I will *consider* changing my language," Agatha snapped. "Are we going now? Let's go."

Carter grinned at Marshall, who was slowly realizing that she had two options: walk back to town, or go to church. She suddenly felt claustrophobic, like the thicket of thorns had collapsed around her, dragging her toward the gravel. This wasn't how interviews, even chasing interviews, used to make her feel. It used to be fun, didn't it? Or at least exciting or interesting. It used to feel like a puzzle. This just felt like theater.

The ride to the church was silent except for the baby, who occasionally babbled his way into being upset, prompting Roswell to try to soothe him with panicked and frantic shushing. Marshall sat beside him and the baby, and Agatha and Carter sat silently up front like two disappointed parents. They passed horses and horses and horses—fields and pastures and barns full of them, all oblivious to their passing. Marshall was shocked at the sheer variety of animals, from short, fat powder puffs to sleek, shining creatures who shook their heads and jumped across the grass as if trying to shrug off gravity.

"What's the little guy's name?" Marshall asked after a few minutes of watching horses chew grass at a stoplight with no cross traffic.

"Phillip," Roswell said.

"Don't you talk to him," Agatha said.

Roswell flushed deep red and looked sideways at Marshall, who gave him an overdramatic wink. The boy almost smiled and Marshall thought, darkly, *No one gives this boy enough attention. They better be careful where he looks for it.*

The church was alone in the forest, propped up in a valley between the trees just off the crumbling road. It was old, and leaned slightly to one side, white and featureless. A few of the windows were stained glass, old and very small—the most they could afford, Marshall reasoned. The siding was bent and freckled with rust, but clean and bright in the morning sun. Beyond it, a very old graveyard sprawled through the misty hills, many of the headstones missing their tops. A few of them had bowls on top; some kind of local tradition, Marshall thought. The leaning church seemed to strain away from the tilted stones, uncomfortable in its own body. The sign said *Saint Francis, Sunday School Signups Almost Full.*

There was a group of people milling about outside, dressed, unlike Marshall, like they were ready for church. Marshall glared at the back of Carter's head. The woman had so casually arranged everyone's embarrassment.

No. She'd arranged Agatha's anger, but it was Marshall's embarrassment.

Touché, Carter.

Bitch.

The congregation seemed to all be variations on the same theme, very white, mostly poor. The girls were very still, their hair long and their dresses flowered. There were men, mustached in cowboy boots and hats, boys who pretended to be tough and ended up looking lost and perhaps scrubbed a little too hard behind the ears, and women who looked tired, tired, tired of holding it all together. The women glared daggers at the rest of their families, as if the only thing keeping them from descending into madness and degeneracy was their unceasing attentiveness. Round-faced, sunburnt children pulled discreetly at their stiff, clean clothes and looked longingly at the mud under their feet. The young women looked stiff, jittery, easily spooked. The young men looked at them like they had the secret answer to everything hidden in their pockets.

Marshall descended into this crowd with all the confidence of a woman stripped naked and kicked onto a Broadway stage.

Everyone wanted to hold the baby and waited impatiently as Roswell unhooked the car seat and handed him to a small woman in a brilliant pink and purple feathered hat. The gathered crowd asked the same five or six questions: Was he sleeping? Whose eyes did he have? How did he, Ros, feel? Was he eating? And so on. The young men and women moved quickly away from this group, as if teenage fatherhood was infectious.

Marshall found herself absorbed into the group, mirroring their smiles, the tilt of their heads, though she felt nothing for the baby. She'd found, historically, that people did not respond well to open indifference to infants, regardless of how anyone really felt. If someone passed the baby, she would have accepted it. There was a joy in the group that could not be resisted.

There was a magical warmth in holding and hugging and *wanting* the baby. If her husband had been—

She throttled the thought before it was fully formed. She realized her face had frozen for a moment too long—a break in her camouflage. Several of the older women were looking her up and down, noticing she didn't belong.

"From the city?" one of them accused.

"Yes," Marshall admitted. "I'm here to do a story on the Bentlys."

The woman's eyes darted to the baby and back again. She made a disgruntled noise in the back of her throat and the wrinkles deepened around her eyes.

"Nothing else around here worth noting?" she asked. "Nothing else about our scrowdy-row lives holds any interest?"

No, Marshall thought. *Literally nothing about your lives interests me.*

"Everyone has stories," Marshall said, a familiar line. "My job is to tell stories. This is just my assignment this time."

"Well," the old woman sniffed. "You tell them to send you back here to talk about what's really happening. No use spending all that ink on a mistake."

"Ma," the cowboy-hatted man next to her whispered, nervously.

"Don't you *Ma* me," the old woman snapped, and the cowboy-hatted man looked chastened. "I *bore* my children! I carried the weight of all of them! I didn't ask for no relief! And when your pa left I carried that too! I didn't leave a single one of you out in a field like some slut!"

The man flushed red and mumbled something about not talking that way.

"Ma, let's go in," a pretty woman said.

"I'm just saying," the old woman said, but she relented to the pretty woman and her gentle hand on her arm. She sounded a little apologetic as she followed her family toward the church.

Marshall felt a hand on her shoulder and turned to find a man with a priest's collar—pale, both him and the collar, with nearly no chin. He was

smiling wanly, and a little apologetically, an expression that was simply how his face rested.

“Welcome, I’m Father Brown. Are you here with Carter, or...”

“Don’t lump me in with her,” Carter said. “She’s here to do another story on Ros.”

“Ah,” Brown said, disappointment laced in his voice. “Well, you’re very welcome here, Ms....?”

“Marshall,” she said, shaking his hand. He seemed surprised by the gesture, and awkwardly grasped only her fingers, squeezing them.

Marshall guessed she was not, in fact, very welcome.

“Ms. Marshall, are you here just the afternoon?”

“All week, actually. I think I might take a look at the fair, learn a little about the town, though I ought to rent a car.”

“City girls don’t own cars?” the father asked.

Marshall smiled coldly. She had a sudden vision of her car, the little red sedan, with its bumper crushed against the brick wall, hissing as something dark leaked onto the asphalt in the night. Kelly, dear Kelly, Kelly-with-three-kids, Kelly with the desk beside her at work, Kelly who brought dinner after the funeral, Kelly who thought her freckles made her ugly when they lit her face up like sparks, Kelly explaining to the police, desperately explaining, trying to keep her out of jail. Marshall saw herself, curled in a ball on the curb, feeling as though if she simply made herself small enough she might tumble into the gutter and float away on the slimy water, never to bother anyone again.

She’s just going through a lot right now.

Kelly hadn’t looked at her.

She’s going through a lot. I can promise you it’ll never happen again.

Kelly’s hands were trembling.

I’ll take her right home. Thank you. Thank you for understanding.
Thank you. Thank you.

“Well, good luck with that, there’s no rental place in town,” Carter said.

“Well,” Marshall said, and then frowned as the rest of the words failed her. Well, what? She didn’t really have a plan. Planning was difficult for her

lately. Planning required a desire to see what the future would bring.

“You’re here the whole week? I’ll tell you what,” Father Brown said. “I’ll rent you the old truck for three hundred and we’ll hand that to Ros and the baby.”

“Not me,” Ros said defensively. “Give it to Carter for the delivery.”

Father Brown smiled sadly.

“That’s kind,” Marshall said and meant it. “I’ll take you up on that. Thank you.”

“Come with me, I’ll get you the keys,” he said.

She followed Brown through the small crowd, many of whom turned and watched her. The women especially were unashamed of raised eyebrows. A man crossed his arms. *Invading the herd*, Marshall thought. *I’m the hawk the sparrows swarm.*

She followed the priest down the aisle of the little church, which smelled of corn chips and rotting wood. The chipped paint showed at least four garish coats, including green and purple, painted over and over and over each other. There was flotsam in the seats, bags and coats crumpled in the corners. A child’s Playmobil horse lay on its side under one pew, the color rubbed off its ears and the tip of its tail. Marshall had a sudden urge to stop and kick it back toward the aisle, in case it was lost.

Father Brown opened a door to the right of the altar and Marshall was shocked at the narrowness of the hallway behind it. Any city inspector with two firing brain cells would have cited it as impossibly dangerous and had them tape it off. Marshall had to duck to get inside. The hallway was badly lit too, most of the light coming from a desk lamp in the room at the end and two small, stained-glass windows featuring the heads of a gray-haired man and woman facing each other with displeasure. The hallway smelled strongly of damp wood and decay, like they were walking through a rotting log.

Marshall followed the holy man carefully and found that the room at the end of the hall was a dingy, narrow study completely filled with books and an ancient, wooden filing cabinet. There was a tiny window, off-center above the desk, which looked out over the graveyard. Marshall thought she

might be able to make out a buck picking his way through the graves, but as she stared at it, it resolved into a bent tree.

“Let me find the keys. I hope it still runs. I haven’t even started it in a month or two.”

“Take your time.”

“Did you stay at the Corral last night?”

Marshall made a noise in agreement.

“Sleep well?”

“Nope. There was a possum in the wall.”

“Good heavens!”

Marshall ran a finger over the spines of the books, theology mostly, though there was an entire section of Brontë novels. Leaning against the wall beside the bookcase was another of the small stained-glass windows, partially wrapped in old newsprint.

“Did one of the windows not make the cut?” she asked, pulling a corner of the paper away. She could barely make out the outline of an infant, probably the baby Jesus, halo and all.

“Oh, we took it down. It might be—” the priest started, then frowned as if regretting that she’d seen it at all, or that he’d let her see it, or that he hadn’t smashed the wretched thing to a million pieces long before Marshall came.

“It might be pertinent to your story, I suppose.”

“Can I take a look?”

He paused for a long time, awkwardly long, and Marshall could feel her fingers itching to pull the paper away from the glass. She could hear the paper crinkle ever so slightly.

“It can’t hurt, I suppose. You should know it’s an old rumor around here. It’s an old wives’ tale. That’s why I took it down, honestly. This is a church. We don’t really have room for—for that sort of thing. My predecessor was more lenient on accommodating folklore, but I try to set *some* boundaries.”

Marshall was already pulling the paper away before he finished speaking.

The window was in the style of the others, in muted colors with slightly elongated, awkward figures that didn't quite interact correctly with the ground. There was a deer, surrounded by a herd of cartoonish horses, and hanging in the sky over their heads was a massive infant, its hands closed in tiny fists. What she'd thought was a halo was actually a golden blob, encircling the whole baby, like a sac. There were small, white clouds floating around it, as if it really was hanging in the air. It might have looked like a nativity, something she would have glanced at and ignored, except for the fact that Marshall was there, ostensibly, to investigate a baby and a horse.

"So, what is the superstition?" Marshall asked, trying to keep most of the interest out of her voice. She tried to sound casual, curious.

"I don't pay attention to it," Brown said, and Marshall could feel the discomfort radiating from him. "Something about horses blessing mothers, relieving their pain in childbirth. I'm sure that idea somehow mutated into the ugly rumors about Ros."

"Do you know who the mother is?"

"Now, come on. I'm certainly not discussing that."

"If you ever want to sell it let me know," Marshall said. "The window, I mean. I like this kind of thing. Vintage stuff."

"Oh, I couldn't possibly let it go," the priest said. "Just wouldn't be right. It's part of the history here, even if it's not always—anyway, here are the keys."

Marshall lingered at the discarded window, keeping a hand against it. Her instinct was to press the issue, to dig at the nervous little man until he gave her something. She sensed a crack in him, a trauma—something that could be burrowed into and made a doorway. But her anger returned, an old friend settling into its comfortable seat in her mind, and she remembered that she didn't care—not about this story or these people or the shitty little town, and she let the paper drop back over the strange infant on the window.

She wrote him a check, which felt old-fashioned, but she didn't have cash, and anyway the town seemed old-fashioned. As she handed it to him,

he looked up suddenly and his polite expression melted into concern. As Marshall turned to follow his gaze she heard it too, the people outside calling out, talking loudly, their voices echoing in the empty church, the anxiety clear as the notes of a bell. She felt a shift in the energy of the day, from the lazy warmth of routine to cold urgency. It was palpable as the temperature dropping, the frost setting in.

Brown put the check on the desk and the two of them hurried outside. The crowd had sprung into action, jogging to cars and trucks. Marshall looked for Roswell and the baby, and found the boy quickly, standing beside a new man, a Black man in uniform, his dark skin marking him in the sea of white faces. He stood beside a beat-up cruiser, though it looked more like a sedan with an emergency light hastily attached to the top. Marshall suspected the coat of arms on the side was a magnet.

Marshall headed toward the group, squaring her shoulders and lifting her chin. She'd learned years ago that if she walked into any group with enough confidence, they often let her stay, even let her listen, sometimes told her things.

The new man stopped midsentence and looked intensely at Father Brown. The look was accusatory, Marshall thought, or hungry. It was a look that was being reined in, steadied, held at bay.

"Jason!" Father Brown said. "Is something wrong?"

"Father," Jason said with a nod, "sorry to be a bother right before mass, but I think we found some of Thomas's horses loose, and the sheriff sent me to find him."

Father Brown smiled pleasantly at one of the other men, whom Marshall assumed was Thomas. He was indistinguishable from the other flannel-shirted, cowboy-hatted men except that he had an uncomfortably long, straight nose. Marshall thought it could use a punch, just to make it a little more interesting.

"I hate to miss service, Father," Thomas said, "but I'm going to nip over and round 'em up."

"Another thing," Jason said slowly, and the weight of the two words could have killed a man if it landed directly on him.

“Shit,” Thomas said, and Marshall saw pain flicker across his face. She thought, to her shock, that he might cry. She imagined men like him did not cry, not ever—not on pain of death. She could picture Joseph rolling his eyes at her for even thinking it.

Men cry, sweetheart. Men cry.

“Yeah, it’s not good, Tom. It’s not good at all,” Jason said.

“What, um...how bad?” Thomas said, already collecting himself.

“Already called the vet,” Jason said, instead of answering. “Brace yourself.”

“That bad,” Thomas said again, and there was a moment of unease, which seemed to last a long time.

“Thank you, Jason,” Agatha said, her voice like the chiming of a clock, moving time forward again. “Ros, you go with them and see if you can help. I’ll take the baby.”

“Okay.”

“It’s a mess, Aggie,” Jason warned. “It’s a real mess.”

“He’ll be fine,” Agatha said.

Marshall looked at Ros, who seemed pale, but nodded. She doubted he had the strength to disagree with his mother, and so he would be fine or die trying. He gave Phillip a squeeze and a too-hard kiss on one cheek, making the baby complain, then handed him to Agatha.

Marshall followed a harried Father Brown around the back of the church and, after a few tries, fired up the old, rusted red Ford.

“You’re not going, are you?” he asked.

She was. Of course she was, but she was having trouble articulating why exactly. Maybe because she was a reporter, *a real reporter*, not a tabloid chaser, and it felt like a real story was actually starting to happen.

“Just feel like I should. I’ll stay out of the way.”

“We’ll be here, praying for you,” he said with an anxious smile, patting the side of the truck like it was a loyal steed.

“Thank you, Father,” Marshall said.

She drove the rattling monster around to the front and stopped at the back of the line of vehicles, waiting to see if anyone would get in. This was

a good in for any story—being available if not helpful. One of cowboy-hatted men climbed into the cab and, to her surprise, so did Ros. Perhaps, in the confusion, Ros ended up with her, a stranger, or he made the decision consciously. She wasn't sure. She didn't ask.

In any case, he was there now, and as Marshall pulled away from the church Ros watched Phillip, his tiny face turned away from him, crushed to his mother's chest. Neither of them was looking at him. Both of them had moved on.

"I don't believe we've met," the cowboy-hatted man said. "I'm Kyle."

"Marshall," she said. "And yes, I stayed at the Corral and no, I didn't sleep well because there was a possum in the walls."

Kyle laughed, and the corner of Ros's mouth lifted slightly and fell again. They lapsed into silence, Kyle telling her to turn left or right from time to time, though she could have easily followed the truck in front of her.

"This happen often? Loose horses?" Marshall asked. She wasn't even interviewing, just sick of the silence. The trip was taking longer than she'd expected.

"Sometimes. There's a lot of horses around here and some of them don't like gates. The town's known for breeding and training, so it's not unusual to find a horse wandering down the road. Most of the time I even know whose it is. Thomas, though, his father bred Iced Pine Bars. You don't know who that is." He took a break to laugh and grin at Ros. "Big stable, big operation, expensive horses."

"Very expensive," Ros murmured.

"Stacy's a good trainer too," Kyle went on, "so he's got boarders on top of that, pay him to care for their horses, most of which were once his horses. Good work if you can get it. And so it goes, right Ros?"

The man laughed again, and Ros didn't answer. Marshall glanced at him, but he wasn't looking at either of them.

"Abraham Daily, that's Ros's great-granddad, he sold Thomas Senior the mare Iced Pine Bars came out of, for probably too little. Been a big stink in the town since. John never did forgive him. Did he, Ros?"

Ros shook his head once.

Stupid small town bullshit, Marshall thought, but her brain noted it anyway, because she was a real reporter, and she couldn't turn it off.

The trucks in front of them pulled off onto the grass beside a long black fence. The men piled out and separated, Ros and the man clearly knowing where they were needed and Marshall hovering for a moment beside the truck, unsure. Her phone rang.

"Marshall," she said.

"Marshall, it's Carlos. I wanted to check in."

Marshall opened her mouth to tell Carlos exactly where he could shove the long end of a sharp broom, but stopped when she heard the creak of Carmen's voice over the phone. Carmen, Carlos's African gray who loved to scream during his owner's phone calls, was yelling *check in, check in, check in* as loud as her little bird lungs could manage. It warmed her heart just a touch to hear the little monster. Despite herself, Marshall liked Carlos. He'd tumbled into his role straight out of graduate school and Marshall had rolled her eyes behind his back quite a bit, but the truth was he was good at his job.

So she chose not to wish violence on him just yet. Not on a Sunday, at least.

"Hey, Carlos. I'm not dead. I'm in a field looking for a loose horse."

"No shit?"

"No shit. We're going to have a long talk about this when I get back."

Carlos laughed and Carmen echoed him, louder and more demonic.

"I look forward to it. Call me back when you find the horse, okay?"

"Yeah, sure."

Jason strode by her, taking long, determined steps.

Marshall stowed the phone and followed him, drawn by his certainty. He seemed like the kind of man who knew what was going on. He seemed like the kind of man who, like a compass, always spun toward the same direction, and was useful to other people because of it. He strode up to a thin woman wearing a thick flannel shirt and jeans, a stethoscope around her neck. She looked anxious and there was blood on her tanned arms.

The woman looked up at Jason gratefully and started speaking to him in a quick, hushed tone that spoke of relieving a great weight.

As Marshall approached, they both went silent. The woman considered her with piercing blue eyes set in a face like leather, deeply lined and beautiful in the way that things with a long history are beautiful.

“Marshall,” she introduced herself. “Anything I can do to help?”

“You’re the reporter,” Jason said, to Marshall’s surprise. “Clint told me you were here.” As if that settled something, he turned back to the doctor, or vet. Probably vet, Marshall realized.

“Stacy called and we’re looking for eight,” the vet said. “Obviously we found the one.”

“Right,” Jason said. “Did she say how?”

“Open doors!” the vet said with the same level of shock she might have used for “*Aliens!*”

“Strange,” Jason agreed. “I’m about to go take a look myself. You want to come, Ms. Marshall?”

The man continued to surprise her. Marshall nodded quickly and he waved her on as he turned to walk up the road. The vet followed him.

“All right, Ms. Marshall,” Jason said. “What we’ve got up ahead is pretty brutal. I’m not sure—”

“I can handle it,” Marshall said.

Jason shrugged, but Marshall knew she was bullshitting. Could she handle it? She certainly hoped so. She had no idea what she was walking into. It seemed impossible to ask now. There was something about Jason’s presence that carried her along with him, like a paper boat in a stream.

“Why are you bothering Ros?” Jason asked.

Marshall found herself relieved by the question. Everyone assumed she had some sinister purpose, and she was glad to find someone who would at least check with her.

“It’s just an assignment,” she said. “Just came up on my docket. I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“Yeah, well, be careful how involved you get. This town isn’t exactly kind to its own folks. It certainly doesn’t have patience for outsiders.”

Marshall took this as a threat at first, but after rolling the words around in her head for a moment, she saw something else in them—a professional courtesy, like another journalist advising her that her interviewee hated a certain topic, or liked a certain kind of soda. Marshall wasn't sure what profession or position they shared, but the deduction felt right.

“Thank you,” she said.

Jason looked at her, his eyes narrowing, but he nodded. The vet said nothing. Her eyes looked far away, as if she was thinking so carefully about another place that she was nearly there.

The fence continued on either side of the road, though the right side looked significantly more worn and some sections had fallen in. Gaps had been patched, but at some point the owner had given up and let nature take it.

“They came through here,” Jason said, pointing at the ground.

Marshall wasn't sure if he was speaking to her or the vet, but they both looked where he was pointing and there were clearly hoofprint in the mud, headed through a broken section of fence and then on up the hill.

“That's good spotting there, boy scout,” the vet said. “Can you tell which direction the wind was blowing and how fast they were going, too?”

“You're hilarious,” Jason said.

They saw it long before they got there, a dark black body lying on its side in the ruins of a section of black fence. At first Marshall thought it was leaning against one of the fence posts, but as she approached, she realized with a punch to her gut that the fence post was *through* it, punched through part of the rib cage and diagonally out the shoulder. Some of the dark patches on the wood were blood.

“Jesus Christ,” Marshall said.

“Yes, indeed,” the vet agreed.

Thomas was kneeling beside the horse, running a hand along its neck, bent so low over the ground that Marshall thought he might lose his balance and tumble over or curl completely into a fetal position. Jason scuffed his boot on the ground loudly, badly disguising it as a stumble, and Thomas quickly straightened and turned to face them.

“Fucking Hershey. Idiot horse,” Thomas said. “Thought I might take her round the circuit next year, let little Janey give her a try, take home some ribbons before she retired.”

He wasn’t talking to anyone in particular. In fact, he was looking at the horse again. Marshall was looking at the horse too. She couldn’t look away from the horse. There was something entrancing about the gore, the violence of the death. She’d seen violence before. Once, back when she was still freelancing, she’d stood next to her photographer during a police riot as she photographed a woman with a rubber bullet where her eye should be. She’d interviewed a man shot through the shoulder while blood trickled through his fingers. She’d long since gotten used to violence and she could feel the very human part of her that was once disgusted by it go away on a little vacation when she covered it now. It wouldn’t detach this time.

This was wrong, as if she had memorized the script of this little assignment in this little town and now everyone was speaking the wrong lines. Reality was interrupted. Still, when she tore her eyes away, the other three witnesses didn’t seem as shocked as she was.

“I’m so sorry, Thomas. You gave her a good life,” Jason said.

“I need to call Stacy,” Thomas grumbled. “I need to be the one to tell her.”

“All right, all right,” Jason said. “We’ll take care of her when the truck arrives, all right? Why don’t we head back to the car?”

“I’d like to stay,” Thomas said.

“Is this,” Marshall paused, looking for the right word. “Is this even possible?”

“Of course,” the vet answered, and Marshall felt the implied *Obviously. You’re looking at it.* But, as an act of charity, she went on. “Horses are large and often clumsy. They are particularly bad at making safe decisions when frightened. Unfortunately, this is not the first injury or death like this I’ve seen and I know it won’t be the last. I was once called to a case with a gate latch through an eye and out the skull. That one survived and didn’t even lose vision! Went on to do summer camp the next year. You just don’t know.”

“Jesus fucking Christ.”

“Language, please,” the vet scolded.

“We got a body!” came a yell from over the hill, and the effect on the group was like the sky opening up and God throwing a thunderbolt down.

“Oh, shit, not another one,” Thomas almost whispered, and Marshall actually saw the tears in his eyes this time.

“Where is it?” Jason yelled, already making his way carefully around the remains of the fence.

“No, a person!”

“Two people!”

“Oh, shit!” Jason yelled and took off running. Marshall followed, leaving the vet looking flustered and confused and Thomas with tears glistening at the corners of his eyes and his hand still on his horse’s neck.

As she ran, Marshall was vaguely aware of a feeling in her chest like she had been hollowed out by a melon baller. It wasn’t pain, exactly, but it was the sense that there was nothing where there should be—had once been—something important. She’d named that feeling Joseph, but the absence was *her*. It was this feeling that terrified her, not the deaths, but the way they echoed in that cavity. She should be excited! She was in the middle of the action again! Instead she felt dread and a deep exhaustion that made it hard to lift her feet off the ground.

She shouldn’t have come. Or she should have come and never left her hotel room. She could have lied and drank gas station beer until she passed out and then taken the bus home in a week. Why was she doing this to herself? Why was she here, in a field that smelled like wet grass and rotten leaves, running?

Stupid. She hated it. She hated all of it.

As they crested the top of the hill they came to a field, part of which was a planting field left fallow for the season. The other half was weeds and wildflowers. There were several men standing in the field, hands on hips in anxious resignation. A few of them were huddled around a pile of human on the ground.

Marshall was distracted by movement back toward the trucks—horses, three of them, white around their pupils as they stomped and threw their heads toward the sky. They were prancing in place, a kind of weightless dance that seemed impossible for something of their size and power. At the center of their starburst was Ros. He might as well have been managing very spirited balloons, gently guiding them, trading the ropes between his hands, speaking quiet words, moving with the horses like a sailboat on the tide—not caught in it, but buoyed by it. It was beautiful, like watching the waves roll in.

The older men took their hands off their hips to wave Jason over, and Marshall finally saw two people lying beside each other in a shallow dip in the field, the dew still beading on the grass around them.

One was almost paper-white pale, completely naked, curled in a ball. She stopped a few feet away from him and simply looked, open-mouthed, at the strange, giant toddler who seemed to have been deposited among the weeds she couldn't name. His chest rose and fell dramatically, as if he really was a child pretending to sleep, stifling giggles at a sleepover.

The other was clearly dead. His dark eyes were misty, looking up at the sky. His wavy black hair rolled over his tanned forehead in the gentle breeze. He was wearing a flannel shirt and tattered blue jeans, work boots that were caked with both mud and tar.

There was a stake through his heart.

The living man made a noise, low and pained, as if the very effort of lying there, curled up on the ground, or perhaps existing at all, was unbelievably painful. Marshall thought, unbidden, of changelings—fairy children replacing human ones, but at that moment the wind changed, and she was able to smell him. She managed not to gag, but she doubted fairies smelled quite like that.

“Oh, fuck, it's Aaron,” Jason said, kneeling beside the man so quickly that Marshall at first thought he'd collapsed. He made two attempts at touching the man, flinching back, as if he wasn't sure what to do or how much contact to make. Finally, he shook the slumped shoulder. “Aaron, buddy, time to get up, all right?”

“Motherfucker,” one of the cowboys swore, but Marshall wasn’t sure if he was calling Aaron a motherfucker, or Jason, or the unnamed man, or if he was simply commenting on the general absurdity of the situation.

“Friend of yours?” Marshall asked, just generally to the crowd. She didn’t really care who answered.

“Fuck no,” one of the men said.

“We went to school together,” Jason answered. “Good guy. He’s just—” Jason trailed off. Marshall thought, *just a little lost*.

“He’s a fucking junkie burnout asswipe,” one of the cowboys said, not the one who said *fuck no* or *motherfucker*, so Marshall took the dislike of Aaron to be a general consensus.

“Good thing is, case closed, right? Fucking bender ended in murder. Done and done.”

“Shut up, Ryder,” Jason said, not in anger, but with a sort of pleading.

Aaron was rousing, in the violent, random way someone who was still high roused. He flailed and rolled, failed to stand, tried again. Marshall tried very hard not to look at his penis.

“It’s a little suspicious, isn’t it? Him here?” the cowboy persisted.

“You think he fucking stuck a horse on a post, Ryder?” his neighbor said, in the tone of a joke, but with no joy behind it.

“I think he probably stabbed the dead guy, or you think they were just snuggling up together? Anyway, you fucking *know* why this happened,” someone snapped back.

“Let’s not start with that bullshit. You believe in fairy godmothers too?”

“I believe in shit I see evidence for.”

“Jason,” Aaron finally managed, “what the fuck time is it?”

“It’s almost ten, Aaron,” Jason said patiently. “You remember how you got here? You’ve got blood on you.”

“Yeah,” Aaron said, looking at the red on his hands. “I think it’s mine. What do you mean got here?”

“You’re in Tom’s field, Aaron. You’re out past the Reeves’s, even. Where the hell are your clothes?”

To their surprise, Aaron confidently pointed to his left. No one moved. It felt like a trap somehow. The whole thing was so silly, and yet so laced with malice and tragedy. When no one moved for another few seconds, Marshall wandered over, trying to look casual. There, in a clump of blue flowers, was a pile of dirty clothes, wet with dew. She picked them up and delivered them to Jason.

“Hey, let’s get these on you,” Jason said. “I’m going to check the pockets, though.”

“Yeah, go ahead.”

Jason began pulling things out of the man’s pockets, small bags that were empty except for the last bits of chemical dust crushed into the corners, a capped syringe, a crushed candy wrapper, keys with a damp rabbit’s foot key chain, and an ad for a remote-control toy car. Aaron pointed at the ad.

“I want to get that for Brandon,” he said.

“Yeah, he’ll like that. Now, this part is important. Do you know who this man is?”

Aaron blinked at him, confused, then slowly followed Jason’s pointing hand to the body on the ground.

“Oh, fuck, Luis. Oh, fuck.”

Marshall looked closer at the body, mostly to avoid staring into its dark, empty eyes. There was a leather bracelet around its wrist stamped crookedly with the word *Hermano* and a small imprint of a daisy.

It isn’t a stake, Marshall thought, running her eyes over the thing protruding from the man’s chest. *It’s a tree branch. Look, there are tree leaves just under him too, but where is all the blood?* Besides the dew, the little ditch was mostly dry.

Killed elsewhere. Dumped here with the changeling.

Marshall looked away, suddenly embarrassed by her open-eyed inspection of a person. A corpse, sure, but still a person. She remembered the deer, the wriggling maggots, and thought she might be sick.

“Did he come here with you?” Jason asked Aaron.

“I don’t remember. I, you know, bought some stuff from him sometimes, but he didn’t have anything for a long time. I didn’t even know he was in town.”

“Wasn’t he working for Thomas?” a hatted man asked.

“Only in the summer,” another answered.

“Let’s get you to the car.”

Aaron agreed and Jason helped him dress slowly, the man shaking from the cold and probably withdrawal. The group of men and Marshall turned away, embarrassed by the tender scene in a way they hadn’t been by Aaron’s nakedness. The men went back to standing around the body, like a clergy of vultures.

Marshall wandered back down the hill to Roswell as more police arrived, with yellow tape and shouting.

She was not sure how close she should get, or even if she should approach at all. Would she alarm the horses? Her only experiences with the animals were fair rides when she was a child and movies, in which they seemed both steadfast beasts willing to gallop into war and flighty creatures who would rear at a slight breeze and deposit their handsome prince on his ass without a second thought.

They were so *huge* and so many parts of them seemed sharp and hard and fast and heavy, and there Roswell was, in the middle of the circle of them, looking focused but calm. He looked a little bored. This was all routine. She couldn’t imagine something so alien, so chaotic, becoming routine. Marshall stopped far enough away that she thought the horses would not be able to kick her, if they wanted. They did not want, and even if they had, she was much farther away than she needed to be.

She was rattled by the body.

By the bodies.

Her hands were shaking.

“Can I,” she gestured awkwardly, “help?”

“Um...” Ros looked slightly panicked.

“You oughta stay out of the way,” a gray-haired woman said, coming up behind her, leading another horse. This one looked drowsy, and at its arrival

the other three seemed to calm, as if they'd been waiting for this last horse to arrive. Joseph had been like that, Marshall thought. He brought a calm with him.

Marshall, useless, sat on the bed of the truck and watched a group of people be experts in things that seemed arcane and a little old-fashioned, but brand new at the same time. It was one of the things she'd used to enjoy about her work, seeing people in a natural habitat so unlike her own, being brilliant at things she knew nothing about.

Aaron refused an ambulance and sat, instead, on the side of the road, wrapped in a blanket and chewing on a bag of carrots originally meant for the horses. He looked like an overgrown child, lost in the woods and found again, waiting for his parents to pick him up. The sheriff finally came and led him away. He seemed annoyed about the bother, and everyone else seemed annoyed that he was there.

Then the trailer arrived, long and brilliant white, with swirls of blue painted on the side. The whole inside was made of swinging panels that men and women pulled open and closed with ease. There were bags of hay. They wrapped the horses' legs with soft fabric and patted them affectionately. There was so much patting, Marshall noticed—so much warmth for a group of people who seemed barely able to look at each other, never mind touch.

The first horse didn't want anything to do with the trailer, digging his heels in and snorting. Ros turned and snapped the line, driving the horse back. The horse was surprised, but quickly backed up, and then they were moving forward again. This time the horse took a few steps into the trailer before it stopped again, and again Ros turned and backed the horse quickly out.

"You got it," one of the women said, her hands on her hips. A few of the other observers agreed with sounds but no words.

This time the horse followed him easily and he clipped the horse's halter to the wall. Marshall only vaguely understood what had just happened—the horse had two choices, backward or forward, so it chose the one that seemed to bring the most peace, the one that came more naturally.

Path of least resistance, Marshall thought. The next few horses, perhaps seeing their herd mate safely inside, walked into the trailer without incident.

What an interesting world, she thought, unexpectedly, and it was like a sigh. It was like setting something down she'd been carrying, not heavy but awkward and a little painful. She leaned on it a little, pushed on the bruise of the feeling, but whatever thought was there wasn't quite solid yet. It was like a door cracking to let a sliver of light in the room, but not enough to see the space with any clarity. Still, it felt good. She hoped it would last.

Another trailer pulled past down the road, she supposed to pick up Hershey, and when that trailer left Thomas appeared beside her, leaned against the truck as if nothing unusual was happening. He pulled a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it in a way Marshall could only describe as *indignantly*.

"Hell of a Sunday," he swore. "You the reporter I heard about?"

"Yeah," Marshall said. "I'm sorry."

"Fucking happens with horses," Thomas said. "They're absolute idiots. They get hurt all the time, mostly because they're doing something stupid. They find new ways to kill themselves. They're the worst investment in the history of the fucking world."

She didn't know why he was telling her this, except that it was like telling a bartender—someone whose job it was to listen and who, at least on the surface, didn't judge. He would probably say something similar to his friends later, but he wouldn't be so damn teary about it. He flicked his cigarette toward the road, where it deposited a tiny constellation of embers. Marshall got hers out as well and felt a surge of relief as she lit one.

"Sad about Luis too. I heard he worked for you."

"Yeah, sometimes. I hired a bunch of them every summer for the hay. Couldn't keep more than Lola all year. Didn't know him well. Thought he went west with the rest."

Marshall noticed there were no tears for Luis. Plenty for the horse, but none for the man.

"They stay with you when they're here?"

"Nah. There's housing for them up the road from the church, on Plum."

“Where do they go, after the season?”

“Not sure. West. Fuck, Daily must be laughing his ass off.”

“I met him. He seemed nice,” she lied.

She knew this was a dig, but some kind of journalistic curiosity had kicked in, or maybe it was her disdain. Maybe she was just stirring the pot.

“He ain’t,” Thomas said. “Stay away from that guy.”

“Something happen between you?”

“Old grudge between our daddies,” Thomas growled. “Long past.”

In the silence that followed Marshall could hear Aaron throwing up a few cars down.

“Big city,” Thomas said, swallowing. “This gotta be a bit of a culture shock.”

Marshall opened her mouth to give a line, something about it being lovely, or quaint, or not what she was used to, but she surprised herself.

“Well, it’s been a little weird.”

“It’ll do that.”

“I have to say I wasn’t expecting a dead body on my first day.”

“Who does?”

Marshall felt she should have a follow-up question, but the tired gravity of the world became overwhelming. She kept thinking of the man’s eyes—Luis’s eyes, looking up at the sky.

“You oughta leave,” Thomas said. “Go home.”

“Sorry?”

“You heard me. You know what I mean.”

She did.

They finished smoking in an awkward but not unfriendly silence and then Thomas nodded once and joined the driver of the trailer to take his remaining horse home—to take the body home.

Marshall saw Luis’s body was still in the field as she left, though someone had covered it in a tarp so that it looked like a leathery blister on the green, green field. She wondered who would take him home.

CHAPTER 4

BROWN

Father Brown checked his watch as the last person pulled out of the driveway. Mass had run late, and he thought he really should go check on Thomas and see if he could be of any help, even if only for emotional support. He shook his sleeve back over the watch face and sighed, long and loud, as if God might hear and take pity.

First, chores.

He cleaned the church, doing so with the same focus and reverence he felt as a boy in awe of the much larger, much more beautiful church he grew up in. He swept the whole place, poking the corner of his broom into the cracks between pew and floor, wall and floor, door and floor, altar and floor. There was trash in there that he would never get out—pocket lint and M&M bits and mud and horse shit that would never ever leave the cracks and crevices of his church. That wasn't the point. The ritual was the point. He wiped the benches. He placed the hymnals straight and centered in the backs of the pews. He then went to the small fridge in the front room and pulled out a box of brown sugar and a gallon of milk. He walked into the graveyard.

Six graves had silver bowls either on top of the stones or, if they were too old and thin, set in front. He had their names memorized: Elizabeth Addlebury, Gretchen Carver, Gregory Washington, and so on. He arrived at Honor Harrison and poured the milk into the bowl, then opened the sugar. It had solidified into rocky chunks as brown sugar always did, and he grumbled as he struck the box against the headstone until the clumps broke into pieces. He measured out three small pieces, dropped them into the milk, and then went to the next. Sometimes he glanced over his shoulder at the woods, the damned mist still lurking around the underbrush and tree

roots. Every time his weakness made him look he scolded himself. He should have more composure. He should have more courage in the Lord to protect him. He peeked again.

Before he went back to the church he took a deep breath and scanned the tree line openly, but he didn't see it today. Today, at least, it did not hunt him or judge him or shadow him through the headstones. Maybe it was busy elsewhere. He hoped it had not been attracted by Thomas's misfortune.

He'd set boundaries, he had rules for precisely how much superstition he would allow, but there were things that must be done. The last priest was very clear about that, had told stories about what happened to keepers of the church who did not stock brown sugar in their cupboards, who did not light the red candle on the full moon or dust the front steps with salt. There were things that were required. There were things that were required of him. He hated them down to the cracks and crevices of his soul and he raged against them even as he did them loyally, meekly, obediently. The ritual was important.

CHAPTER 5

AGATHA

Phillip was a good baby, as much as any baby could be a good baby. What adults usually meant by that was that they did not cry too much and slept when it was convenient. So, by those measures, Phillip was a very good baby.

He cooed and whimpered through mass, took a bottle, then slept on the way home, ate, slept again. Agatha bounced him on her shoulder mostly out of habit. Phillip didn't care either way, would sleep if bounced or carried or sometimes just wrapped up and left alone, but she felt uneasy, and the bouncing was helping her. She stood by the window of the little trailer, ignoring the half inch of dust lying like a carpet on the windowsill.

She glared at the world. She was a woman who had grown in her anger and impatience until it became like the weight of a winter coat in spring. She was unashamed of it to the point that she would be alarmed if it ever went away. She did not think of herself as an angry person. Strong, serious, but angry? No. Never, no. She wasn't gentle, but she would never think of herself as *angry*. *Practical*, perhaps. In this world angry women were just being practical. Today, however, the anger was giving way, in inches, to fear.

Agatha had grown up in a house, in a town, in a world where she was never entirely safe, and she had long ago learned to trust the instincts that made her stomach hurt and her blood pound. Her clothing, growing up, always smelled of sweat and smoke—a kind of chemical burning that never left. She recognized the look of men and women who were hungry, sometimes for those chemicals and sometimes, confusingly, for her. She knew the look of someone who needed to hit something. She knew when something that lived outside a person owned them. She could spot when

someone had retreated entirely from wounded into reckless. By the time her dingy and furious mother left her difficult and arrogant father, Agatha had made herself heavy and tough and sharp.

She shushed the baby, a constant hissing noise that sounded like the wind through the trees. It didn't soothe the baby, just as it had never soothed Ros, and was always more for her than them.

She was upset because Ros wasn't home. She was worried about him, or she was worried because her first student of the day would be there soon and she needed Ros to watch Phillip or to go to the barn and saddle the horses. She could always call Bridget or Paige or McKenzie or any of the dozen little girls and teenagers who loved the barn fervently and who would drive or bike or walk there as fast as they could for the privilege of touching the horses, brushing the horses, leading them to the ring. She would reward them with free riding time, although she didn't need to. She recognized in them an adoration for the animals that she herself felt growing up. It was enough to be around them, to feel the tug of their movement against your heart, like a tide, like an ocean wave pulling itself in and out of a shallow pool. Like being rocked. Like being soothed. In a very dangerous world, little girls often felt safe around these bigger, sharper, stronger creatures. In a very dangerous world, little girls found shelter where they could.

When Ros was little, she was thrilled to see this obsession growing in him too, but she saw it less and less now. She could see the care of the horses was becoming a chore to him, a burden. She suspected he would leave, as so many young people had left. Ros was a child she once felt she understood, once loved completely, once connected to like a buckle through leather, but now they simply lived parallel lives—proximity without connection. Perhaps it was the fundamental truth of Phillip, the sudden tidal wave of adulthood that had torn Ros away, but it must have started before then, because Phillip's birth had been a complete surprise to Agatha, and Ros had never surprised her before. He had always been quiet, dependable, unassuming. He, too, had been such a good baby.

She missed him; missed that version of him.

She narrowed her eyes at the white truck driving down the main road, turning its signal on, and turning slowly toward her. Instinct and reality swirled together, a queasy soup in her stomach. She left the window and hurried to the baby's room. She willed peace into him, willed him to be quiet for a while, willed him to stay a good baby as she lay him in the bassinet. Her heart was pounding. She needed him to be still. She needed, with a desperate ache, for him to not need her for a few minutes.

Phillip mumbled and for a moment his whole body tightened as his face convulsed in an expression that would have been, on an adult, fury. Then he settled. Then he was still.

The truck was parked in front of the house, not around the back. That was good. It would be harder to get him out of the barn. If she had to argue him back into the truck and all the way to the front of the house it might take the whole afternoon. The two men climbed out and marched toward the front door with the ease of men coming home. She straightened her back and tried to remember the resentment in her mother's face, the clench of her crooked hand on Agatha's much smaller one, the straight, straight, straight line of her back. She breathed that image in and out and then opened the door.

"What do you want, John?"

He wasn't even halfway between the truck and the door and her words didn't slow him. He just smiled, like they were sharing a joke, like yelling at him—using his first name instead of his title, instead of *Dad*—was a little inside joke they shared.

"Hey baby," he said cheerfully. "You got a minute to talk?"

"I'll call the cops," Agatha said, and then admonished herself.

She hadn't meant to escalate so quickly. The young man beside Daily shifted uncomfortably at the word *cops* and looked over his shoulder, as if she had summoned them just by mentioning them. She knew him, Jake Something-or-other, a few years older than Ros. She knew his father, or had known him, before he'd gone to the "big prison" up in Jackson County. She never understood why young people flocked to Daily after their families fell

apart, when he was often the one who had pulled them apart in the first place.

“You’ll do no such thing,” Daily said.

“I fucking will,” she answered.

“Agatha Daily—” he started.

“Not my name,” she snapped.

“No, you’re right,” he sighed. “You kept the deadbeat’s name instead.”

She bristled in the deadbeat’s defense, even though literally any other human being in a hundred-mile radius could have said the same thing and she would have spat on Peter’s name with them. Not this man, though. Not her father.

But he had disarmed her, thrown her off her balance. He wasn’t leaving, and she didn’t know how to make him leave. She didn’t actually want to call the police on him.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“Well, I’d like to see my great-grandson,” Daily said.

He was at the bottom of her stairs now, in his flannel shirt and jeans and mud-splattered tennis shoes. He looked like an old man, a harmless man—a man who spent the morning tinkering in a workshop somewhere and then, smelling of sawdust and wood glue, got in his old truck to visit his first and only great-grandchild at the family farm. She knew what he actually smelled like—smoke and cleaning supplies and burnt sugar. She knew that his gun would be tucked into Jake’s pants. She knew, like everyone knew, that he’d once killed two men, or had them killed, and buried them in the landfill or dumped them in the Narrow Bone River. They all knew it.

“I told Ros it was his call, and he’s not here,” she said. “If he wanted you to see Phillip he would’ve called.”

Daily snorted. “Aggie, that boy wouldn’t even breathe in such a way you’d disapprove of. If you told him you didn’t care if he called me, he would. You know he would.”

He laughed and Jake took a moment to lean around the house and squint at the horses on the other side. Somehow the motion held a threat in it, an

acknowledgment that everything Agatha loved was so very out in the open, so unprotected.

“Well, that’s okay anyway,” Daily said, waving a hand as if to absolve her. “I’m really here to talk about our problem.”

“Our problem?” Agatha echoed.

She was sick of holding open the door. The spring shook with the tension and it was too cold outside the trailer. She also didn’t want to close it behind her. That felt too much like stepping into John Daily’s space—too much like being *with* him. She wished she’d put on a coat.

“You know what I mean,” Daily said.

She did. She did know. She felt the old fear reach up from the earth under the stairs and wrap its cold fingers around her organs, squeeze. She remembered the night, the dark night, the blood, Ros crying and holding Phillip in the hay. Still, she almost argued with him, just because she hated him, and especially his being right.

“What are you going to do about it?” she asked.

“I ain’t gonna hurt him,” Daily said. “But you and I both know something has to be done, there’s systems...” He trailed off, because they both knew. They knew. “And we gotta put it right or it’s going to turn on us, Aggie.”

“I’m not being any part of this,” Agatha said. “Neither is he.”

“I wouldn’t ask you to,” Daily said. “I never asked that of you, Aggie. But he’s part of it no matter what he wants, and that’s my problem. I’ll take care of it. I already got plans to take care of it.”

“So why are you here?” she asked.

“I want you to know in case they come at me,” Daily said. “I want you to know I did it for you, and for Roswell, and for the baby. I want you to know so that you can be there if they come for me.”

“Are you going to—” she couldn’t say the words, but it was sinking in what he meant—that there needed to be punishment and he would arrange it.

“I already did. Thought it would work but I guess I didn’t get it right.”

“Did what? The thing with Thomas’s horse?”

“Thought I’d take that asshole down a peg. He never was square about what he owed to your grandfather. You don’t fuck with the Dailys and he should know that.”

“What are you talking about? The stud sale? That was all above board!”

“I’m not having this fight again, Aggie. I’m not doing it. Anyway, it didn’t work.”

In the house Phillip cried. It was a small noise, a test, to see if she came running right away. Her hand tensed on the door. The spring trembled.

“Fine,” she said. “Yeah, fine. I don’t want to know about it. The baby is crying.”

“I hear ya,” he said. The smile hadn’t left his face. It hadn’t even quivered. “Don’t let me keep you, but bring the boys by the café sometime, okay? I miss you. And Agatha? I do love you.”

She closed the door and locked it, both locks, and watched them from the window, at an angle she knew he couldn’t see. In his room, Phillip was still whimpering, and his distress pulled at the loose threads of her patience.

Agatha bounced Phillip and watched until the truck pulled away. Cursing, she picked up the phone to see if one of the girls would come and tack the horses. She could ride one of the ponies after, if she liked. The girl was thrilled and Agatha listened to her babble about getting her bike right away, being right over, thank you, thank you so much.

As soon as she hung up, she left the baby in the crib. She knew she shouldn’t leave the baby. But she couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t breathe. Her fucking father. Her fucking son.

She sprinted down the driveway and the gelding trotted over to the fence. He would do. Any of them would do. She ducked under the fence and groaned. She was getting too old for that. The gelding was fascinated, his head high, ears forward. She ran her hand along his side and felt her heart still, just a little, as if it was that organ she was calming instead of the horse.

“Hush,” she said. “Hush. It’ll be okay.”

The gelding snorted and flinched, but he soon lowered his head and began investigating her pockets.

She realized she was crying—had been crying. Was still crying.

She leaned against the horse and he let her. He smelled like earth and sawdust and sweat. He smelled like heat. He smelled like salt. He smelled like something deep and dark and welcoming.

Her heart stilled a little more.

“Hush. Hush.”

Ros arrived just before the lesson started. Six little girls lined up beside their ponies, holding their arms up to the stirrup leathers to try to adjust them short enough for their legs. The girl who had, indeed, biked the three miles to clean and tack the ponies was going from each little girl to the next, showing them what to do. Her voice was dripping with arrogant patience, the knowledge won with the sweat of three-mile bike rides and late nights and blisters on her small hands.

Brittany, Agatha reminded herself. At least remember the girl's name.

Agatha handed the baby to Ros, grumbling something about the mud on his church pants and watching him duck his head. She regretted the complaint immediately. Ros was a good boy, had done good by going to help with the horses, and anyway, she was the one who told him to go in the first place. She was tired and frustrated—by the crying infant, by the sharp detour of her son's life, by her father, by all the things that pressed against the windows at night—poverty and hunger and addiction and on and on and on. Ros was, sadly, the one who was always there to soak up that irritation. He took it with his usual calm, his unflappable spirit, and since Agatha did not see the barb lodge itself deeply inside him, she told herself it hadn't.

“Were you helpful?” she asked.

“Yes, ma'am,” her son said.

“Everybody okay?”

“Somebody got hurt. I didn't see. Thomas lost Hershey. She died on the fence. I think Ginger pulled something. She was lame getting on the trailer.”

Agatha could picture Hershey, could picture his dam and sire too. It was a shame, and she felt the tug in her heart of her own lost horses. She should call Thomas. Not that they knew each other well, except as competitors,

sometimes rivals, and what would she say? *I know what you're feeling*, she wanted to say. *I know this too and let the mirror of that pain halve it.*

"That's what happens when you make a girl Stacy's age a full-time barn manager," Agatha said.

"She's, like, twenty-two, Mom," Ros tried. Phillip burped.

"A baby," Agatha insisted, and because she felt a lecture bubbling up inside her, she shrugged on her coat and turned away from them.

The girl—Brittany—looked up at Agatha with something like awe as she approached. It was awe in the purest sense, both love and fear of the power Agatha wielded—the unknowable whims that determined how she distributed her anger, her approval, her gifts—usually in the form of access to her horses. The precious horses. The beautiful horses. The holy, glorious horses. The girl would do anything to run her hands along the fur, to break the ice in the buckets, to let her eyes rest on those horses. She felt as if her life was always vibrating around her, and was only still when she could touch them. Agatha knew this because she had once been a little girl herself.

Behind her, the smaller girls were still forming that awe, but it glittered across their faces. Their minds were changing, affected by the magic of the strange, liminal world of the stable. It was a place that felt old and new at the same time, grimy yet pure, bright and sunken in shadows. They stood, shivering slightly, in their secondhand cowboy boots and torn, too-big pink and purple jackets, contemplating the grave responsibility handed to them, not just for themselves, but for the alien creatures standing beside them. Their small hands tightened on the reins and they shivered. The horses, accustomed to this ceremony, mostly ignored the little girls, but when they didn't—when they turned their huge, black eyes to the children, the little girls felt the power of that regard, of that acknowledgment, like heat or tide or the gravity that pulled them to the ground and skinned their knees. It was a force of nature.

It was a powerful gift, Agatha knew, and it would stay with them for their whole lives. It wasn't enough to keep them safe from all the monsters,

but it might tie them strongly enough to the world, to themselves, to a greater power, to whatever they needed, that they could endure as she had.

“Well, you all know what to do,” Agatha said. “Get in line for the mounting block. Let’s get started.”

CHAPTER 6

MARSHALL

She stayed until the coroner showed up to take the body. By then almost everyone else had left. Roswell had gone in the trailer with the horses, and her other passenger had simply disappeared. He'd probably begged a ride from someone else, but if the field itself had opened up and swallowed him, Marshall would have been none the wiser. The remaining police looked bored as the body disappeared down the road in a black car.

Marshall wondered where it was going. Was this place big enough for a morgue? Would it have to go to the next, larger town, or perhaps to her own city—a grim parade heralding her own prodigal return? Or would it be put in some kind of improvised space, a freezer or an ice cream truck?

No. That was silly. Certainly people died here too. Certainly they must have a proper place to be dead in.

Marshall got in the rattling truck and headed back to the church. By the time she arrived she was no longer in the mood to attend mass. She idled out front for a few minutes, the birdsong drowned out by the noise of her machine. She scanned the dark forest. Surely there had once been larger trees here, back before logging had devastated the old-growth American forests. Yet these trees seemed impossibly large—unreal in a way. Fairy tale. Looming fantasies.

Nightmares.

No, she was in no mood for church.

She continued on, heading for the hotel, but remembered that someone had said Luis lived near the church.

On Plum.

Plum turned out to be the next street. She turned and drove the length of it, passing barns, a field of black and white cows, a few horses, but no

houses or hotels. The street dead-ended on Moon Cricket Road.

Marshall turned around and drove slower. The horses and cows were at the fence this time, perhaps curious about a very rare visitor. She pulled over to the side to take a look at one of the buildings, and a splotchy tan and white horse wandered over with its foal to get a closer look at her. The foal stuck its white face through the fence and flicked its ears. Its eyes were very, very blue.

Did horses usually have blue eyes?

Dogs had blue eyes. She supposed horses could have blue eyes, too.

It was weird, though. The creature didn't look right. It looked like a baby horse with human eyes. It blinked at her with a human curiosity.

Stupid. You just have the fucking tabloid in your head.

She pulled back onto the road and turned in to what might have been a driveway, half-choked with weeds. There were Coke bottles lined up inside the window of a building like curious cows. One of the barns, smaller than the others, had a house door on the front and a few milk crates in a circle in the mostly dirt yard. Inside a circle of bricks lay the ashes of a long-extinguished fire. She drove farther and got out near one of the barns. House? Shed? Whatever it was.

She could see now that there were six of them, all the same rough box shape with no windows, though it looked like some were given more love than others. One had a little pergola front porch. Another had a strip of a garden out front with long-faded fabric flowers sticking out of the ground. There was a child's bike, or what was left of it, half sunk into the earth near a poured concrete porch. Someone had written *Jose* and *Margarite* in cement while it was wet. The grass was worn and the dirt trod to sand.

She tried the doors one by one and they were all open. In fact, none of them had locks. The rooms were mostly empty, and dark. She used her phone's flashlight to look at the bare mattresses on wire bunk beds, the cracked toilets, the tiny shower stalls. There was a beheaded plastic Mickey Mouse in the corner of one shower. This revelation was only slightly less disturbing when she realized it was the bottom half of a children's shampoo

bottle, and the other half was behind the curtain, waving a white-gloved hand at her.

There was a Pack ‘n Play in one corner too, old, with the print worn off the fabric in several places. Marshall found herself shocked that there would be tiny children—infants—here, but of course there were. What did she expect, that they would be left behind? Surely some of them were. Surely there were tearful phone calls home to Grandma and the kids. There were cards and money mailed home. There were gifts on holidays. Then there were babies here, and young children, maybe also working with their parents. Maybe doing homework by flashlight on the beds. She wasn’t sure which would be worse, to leave your child or to drag them to a windowless room with eight other people.

Her hand went to her stomach unintentionally. She pressed but didn’t feel even an echo of pain anymore. That seemed unfair somehow. It should have hurt longer.

The thought made her light a cigarette.

Only one of the buildings had a stove and a refrigerator, and she realized it was because only that building had outlets. Only two had bathrooms.

There’s housing for them up the road from the church, on Plum. Some housing, she thought. Some of the barns along the road looked nicer than this.

She found where Luis had been staying, in the building nearest the road. There was a sleeping bag on the bottom bunk and a very full backpack under the bed. Marshall reached for it and then froze.

What the hell am I doing?

This wasn’t an investigation. She wasn’t a cop and she was barely a journalist. She wasn’t about to go through a dead man’s things because she was a little curious and a lot nosey.

Except it was an investigation, wasn’t it? There was a body now, not just a baby and a pony. There was a real story, and she was here to cover it. She could feel it coming together already. A strange body in a field. An

officer's friend suspected. Small-town justice. This was a much better use of her time than "Boy Fucks Horse."

On the small table next to the bed was a well-worn copy of *All-Star Superman*, a black marker, a pair of reading glasses, and a note written on a piece of spiral notebook paper.

Entrega, conoce a aron, llama a chula, pan, soda, mantequilla

On the back of the paper was *Daily, 52 Martingale Lane, casa azul.*

Daily again. Or maybe Luis was reminding himself to do something daily. No, that wasn't right. What was the Spanish word for *Daily*?

Marshall put the note in her pocket and left quickly. Her heart was racing, as if Luis would be back any moment and catch her.

It was a ridiculous thought, she realized as she pulled back onto Plum. The police might come and confiscate all his things, but most likely his friends would find them in the spring, a soft memorial in a dark room.

Church was letting out as she pulled off Plum, and she was relieved to join the line of cars all going somewhere. Somewhere else.

CHAPTER 7

ROSWELL

Inside the trailer, Ros thought about the dead horse, the dead body on a pole and the dead man in the field, and crushed his hands into his pockets as they shook. He hadn't seen it, but he could build a bloody picture in his head, and it made him want to vomit. He had no evidence that it was his fault, but he took the guilt on as easily as slipping on his coat. Emma had tried to warn him as best she could that there would be consequences for what she had done—what *they* had done. Emma, his...girlfriend? His enemy? In any case, it was like Phillip's mother said. On the phone that night, crying like a baby, she told him what she had done and what she had failed to do, and he had felt like that spike had already gone through him.

Or—or it was a coincidence. It was all coincidence and she had been lying to him to make him afraid, to hurt him the way he hurt her. He remembered whispering in her ear as he put his hands under her shirt.

Everything is okay. It's okay.

It's not. It was not.

Roswell bounced the baby and hovered nervously near the phone. At one point he held his hand over it, pressed a finger to it. He walked away. No, no. He would leave her alone. She deserved to be as free from the place as anyone could be. Still, he couldn't just stand by the window and look out at the driveway either, at the yard, at the fence, at the dark forest beyond. Because he could not shake the feeling that something was out there, watching him, yearning for him. If he stood very, very still, did he hear his name? Was it calling his name?

Yes. Oh, God, *he could hear it.*

CHAPTER 8

AARON

Aaron had been asked, more than once, what being high felt like. The question was usually asked in anger—usually as a half-accusation. But despite the tone, Aaron knew that the question was a weak attempt to understand, even to empathize. Like love and pain, there was no way to adequately describe an experience like a high. Perhaps that was because it was so entirely chemical. It wasn't logical. It wasn't procedural. It was biological, or something deeper than that, something at the core of him, something in the spirit. The point was, they couldn't know, and even if he had the words—good, sturdy, honest words—they would be inadequate to describe the feeling.

Numb, he told them. When they pressed, he added, “It just numbs everything, feelings and everything. It just makes it go numb.”

They accepted that, or rather, they didn't argue with that. Everyone could understand numbness, the need for it. Every human, if they'd lived long enough, had some splinter in their soul that they wished they could remove or, failing that, anesthetize for a while. They could understand that human weakness, could quantify it, could even forgive it, given enough time and a deep enough grace. But it wasn't true. Or rather, it wasn't entirely accurate.

When Aaron got high, he felt rescued. He felt complete, for a single, brilliant second, and then he simply felt safe, buoyed in the great, dark ocean of his life. For decades he'd felt that he was swimming through painfully cold darkness, and sometimes there was something solid to hold onto. It was falling and then catching oneself. It was not *good*, or at least it wasn't anymore. Once, he thought, it was really good. Once it was orgasmic, but now it was simply a moment of survival in a life spent

continuously dying. When he was hanging above the freezing waters, it was nice to look down and think detached, poetic thoughts about drowning, but when he fell again he could think only of survival.

Sometimes, the best of times, oxy felt like it was physically lifting him from the cold water just before his head went under, but it never put him down on the shore. He never felt that security, that equilibrium. It just lifted him, through the waves, through air, the cold, the emptiness. It lifted and lifted, pulling him toward something unnamable, and then let go, and he fell again into the cold and the deep.

When he woke up in the cell he was already sinking back into sobriety, and the world settled in his lungs in its familiar horrifying way. He groaned, and then the pain set in, as if he'd jogged and lifted weights and then wandered next door to a bar, picked a fight with the biggest man, and let that man beat him against the pavement for half an hour.

Something told him it might be better if he sat up, but it wasn't. Now he was also dizzy on top of everything. Dizzy and sick, sick and dizzy. The edge of memory, just the bloody corner of what he had seen the night before, drifted into his mind, and it was enough to force everything out of his stomach, splattering onto the concrete floor. The carrots and nothing, because that's all he'd eaten since—he could not remember. Stomach acid found his sinuses and he snorted and spit as tears and bile ran down his neck.

There was someone else in the cell with him, he realized, as the man recoiled from his vomit, stood and slammed his hand against the bars, yelling for the deputy, for anyone to come and save him from being trapped in a cage with him. No one would come, Aaron knew. They came when they wanted to come, when they needed you, or when they were bored and feeling mean.

Where would he get his next high? This was the immediate problem that needed to be solved. Well, perhaps the more immediate problem was that he needed to get out of jail, but that would likely take care of itself, and besides it was only the first part of the problem of how to find oxy. So, the real problem was how to find oxy. That problem needed to be solved, or at

least he needed to think of a solution immediately. Immediately. Immediately.

He could go see Chuck. Where would Chuck be? He might be at work right now, on the factory floor, and he told Aaron never to bother him at work. What time was it? When was his shift over? Jason had told him what time it was, lying in the field with the sky over his head. What time had it been? How did that relate to the time it was now?

Why was he in the field?

The blood smeared on the grass like oil—red, red, red like his mother’s Christmas poinsettias, like velvet. A dark head rising from the ground like a seven-foot tulip of bones. It looked at him, its eyes so deep he thought that they were gone, that he was looking through the thing’s skull, through the earth, down, down into the void of everything and the bones scraped against each other and then he screamed.

“Hey, Aaron,” Jason said. Jason was there now, standing outside the cell, ignoring the other man, the disgusted man. “You okay, buddy? You want that ride to the hospital now?”

“What?”

The words came up with a burp. He hadn’t been screaming at all. Had he? Only his brain was screaming.

“You threw up, buddy.”

“Oh, yeah, I did.”

His brain was still screaming a little, but in another room.

“I think we ought to go see the doctor, bud,” Jason said.

Aaron liked it when Jason called him *bud*, but he also hated it, because it made him sound like his little brother. He hated it because it felt like it belonged in a different life, where things were better.

“I’m fine,” Aaron said.

“We’ll hit the ER. They’ll have to see you.”

“Pass. I just need a shower and some food.”

The disgusted man moved to the far corner of the cell and eyed Aaron carefully, as if he might jump across the short distance and barf on him as a last, indignant attack.

“Yeah, okay,” Jason conceded. “You want to talk about last night?”

Aaron did not want to talk about the night, or think about the night, but in a blessed, charitable moment, his memory offered nothing. A blank whiteness opened up where his past should be, and he was grateful.

“I don’t remember,” Aaron said. “I was high as shit, Jason. You know. You found me in a fucking field.”

“Yeah, and there’s that little fact about the dead body. Bodies. The horse too.”

“I just found it.”

He had been sure of that, but as he said it out loud, he was also sure it was a lie, or that there was a lie attached to it.

“You just found what?” Jason said.

“The horse. I just found it.”

“I thought you didn’t remember.”

Fuck, Aaron thought. Fuck. Shit. Goddamnit.

But he didn’t remember, not really. He needed to find Daily. Daily would help him straighten out the story, get it flat and free of wrinkles and pins. Daily would be furious, too, Aaron knew, and that frightened him, but not enough that he wouldn’t go see him. Or would he be angry? Had he done what Daily wanted? The horse was out. The horse was dead. Was that part of the deal? They’d spoken about it at the diner.

Daily would have drugs, a cornucopia of drugs, and Daily owed him, and just like that, two problems were solved and a modicum of peace settled over Aaron’s soul, like a thin blanket over a freezing man.

“Is this an interrogation or what?”

“I’m off the clock, and I really want to help you get out of this one. I do. But it’s a doozy, bud.”

“Is it?”

“Seems like you could use a friend.”

Aaron almost scoffed, but stopped himself. Jason had always hovered in his life like a loyal dog, and no matter how much he kicked the man away, he always came back, tail wagging. And Jason was right. He did need a

friend. He didn't see a clear way out of this one. Hell, he could not even see the problem clearly. Something violent had happened, and he remained.

Aaron changed tactics, putting both his hands against his stubbly head, squeezing tightly and groaning with only half-faked drama. He peeked up at Jason, who looked dubious, but Aaron knew the blow had landed. Like the talk of numbness, the pain, the sickness was something that everyone understood about junkies, even if they hadn't experienced it themselves. It made them feel bad and want to help him feel better. That fact could be used as a lever when he needed to move someone.

"Sheriff says you can go for now. I paid your bail. Again."

"I can go?"

"For now."

They left in silence, because there was nothing he could say to that. *Thank you* seemed too weak, too small. Aaron kept his eyes on the dingy yellow and gray tile as they left, ignoring the glares from the other officers. He knew he would be back. Whatever had happened, it would be easy to pin it on the junkie and move on with their lives. Were they just finding the evidence now, or bending it to fit him?

He thought he might throw up again.

He followed Jason's shoes to the car. Only then did he raise his head and dare to look at the rest of the world.

Same old town, the color of cement and sun-bleached wood. From here he could hear the highway, the soft *woosh* of people going far far away from him.

Why hadn't he left long ago?

"When's the last time you saw Brandon?" Jason asked as he started the car.

Fuck, Aaron thought again, because that hurt, and that wasn't fair. He deserved it. But he also felt guilty, and that felt unjust, given how sick he was.

"Just yesterday," Aaron said.

"Yesterday?"

"Day before yesterday," Aaron tried to correct himself. "Tuesday."

“It’s Sunday, Aaron,” Jason said.

Aaron felt the bottom of his stomach fall out. Had it been so long? Was it really Tuesday when Sherri brought the boy to the park and they had a solid half hour to run circles around the swings and climb backward up the slide?

The dark and cold water of the night before started to close around the memory and Aaron snapped back to the car, to his old friend, to the fields beyond the windshield. Best not to remember too hard yet. Not yet. He needed to get above the waterline again and then the memory wouldn’t haunt him anymore.

“You think they’re going to send me to jail for this?” he asked.

“I don’t think they can prove you killed anything,” Jason said. “Where’s the blood, just to start. Also, that’s not you.”

“If they can’t prove it, will it make a difference?”

“They’re not going to string you up just because.”

Idiot. Sweet, gullible idiot.

He remembered once when the football team had told Jason they wanted to take him to a party and Jason really believed it, then showed up alone behind the bleachers. Even after the five guys beat the shit out of him, he sat holding a red, red tissue under his bleeding nose in the back of Angela’s Ford Fiesta, wondering out loud if he could still make the party.

“There’s no party, dumbass,” Angela had said.

And Jason answered, “Are you sure?”

“I think you had a bad night,” Jason said, dragging Aaron back into his older, sicker body. “Something bad happened and you were nearby, but I’m not going to lie, I’d like you to lay low for a few days and sober up. A lot of people are angry and you’re an easy target.”

The very thought shot Aaron through with ice. Sober up? He couldn’t. There were sharks in the water now.

Jason frowned. “But I know it won’t do any good. You got to decide to do it yourself.”

“I want to, Jason,” Aaron said, and he thought that he meant it. “I really want to, you know, for Brandon.”

“He’s a good kid.”

“Yeah.”

“He should have a father.”

“Yeah.”

“So here’s the thing. I put a call in to the Lily Clinic and they got a space for you. I can take you to see Brandon and then we can head up there, today.”

“Right now?” Aaron said. “I keep telling you, man. I got no insurance.”

“All paid for, I took care of it,” Jason said. “Well, some of it was calling in favors...or promising favors, but it’s all done.”

Aaron looked at him with shock, with terror, with something like a child outgrowing faith on Christmas morning, seeing the magic and yet not believing it, hating himself for not believing it, and yet knowing that the disbelief was true, somehow, a deeper knowledge of how the universe worked. Jason couldn’t understand—would never understand, and that ignorance would be like a canyon between them as long as they lived.

Still, he might try for Jason. And Brandon. Maybe it was time—

the red wet velvet on the dark grass and the screaming in the distance and the shadow lurching over the hill like the void behind the moon—

It was time to do the hard thing. It was time.

“Yeah, okay,” Aaron said.

Jason caught his breath and covered it with a cough.

“Proud of you, bud,” Jason said. “I’m proud of you.”

“But I want to say goodbye, to my parents and Brandon. I want to go home, and”—he looked down in dismay at his mud- and vomit-soaked clothing, smelled the sweat, the stink of himself—“I need a shower before I see him. Can we go tomorrow?”

“Okay, let’s do that,” Jason said. “If you promise, and I mean really promise.”

Aaron smiled back at him. He couldn’t help it. The man’s relief was palpable and contagious. He really did care about him. Hell, Jason loved him. He did. Maybe if things had been different—

Maybe if the football players had just let Jason go to the party. Maybe if they hadn't been such racist assholes. Maybe if Jason had looked more like his white granddaddy than his black one. But Jason got it in his head that he and Aaron could join the team, even if only the JV team, and it would show them, somehow, that they were just as good. And Aaron thought, why not? Fuck them, but also fuck Jason somehow, and either they'd get in or they'd get the shit kicked out of them and that would be very funny too. They were up at five a.m. for tryouts, in a changing room without heat, grinning stupidly at each other through little clouds of lung fog, lacing up cleats alongside the other boys.

The next thing Aaron remembered was screaming, staring wide-eyed through a wreath of white faces and one Jason, who was crying and yelling, "What did you do? What did you do? Why did you do that?" And Chad Warton was shaking his head and going, "I didn't mean to! It was a joke! I just wanted to show you guys!"

Then the coach was there, saying something something, son, something something, got you. And Aaron tried to raise himself into a sitting position and before Jason could push him back he could see the zigzag of his leg—the white peeking through.

Anyway, he could still change his mind about going into the program. But he didn't want to. He could, but no. He was going to go. He had made his decision. For now. Yes. Yes, he could be brave for his son. He would pretend he could see a shore—that there was a shore at all. He didn't need this, the buoy, this island, but even as he said that the drowning sensation returned, the cold, and without the drug, what would he hold onto?

Jason's truck sped past barns and fences and fields. The horses were inside now, called in to eat. Aaron hadn't worked on a farm, but he knew these things. They were part of the DNA of his town, and so they were part of his DNA. That made him a little uncomfortable, like someone taking his hand in the dark. How could you trust something you didn't entirely understand?

"Who was that chick?" Aaron asked. "That lady in the trench coat? Talking to Thomas? Who was that?"

“Some reporter here to talk to Ros,” Jason said.

The boy’s name made Aaron’s stomach curl in on itself, the hangover of another almost-memory he didn’t dare pursue.

He didn’t dislike Ros, but the name made him afraid, and he wasn’t sure why.

“They should leave that kid alone,” Aaron mumbled.

He didn’t ask for details. Everyone knew. Everyone *knew*.

“Fucking strangers coming here and they don’t know anything.”

“Yeah,” Jason agreed. He was squinting out the windshield, slowing for the stop sign.

On the road, fifty feet ahead, a blanket of white fog rolled across the pavement as the evening cooled. Aaron uncrossed his arms and gripped the edge of the seat. He never drove through fog, but he knew people who did, who didn’t believe, who called it a superstition. They might be right, but he knew how the fog made him feel, like the earth had vanished and the sky had flown away and if he looked up or down he would be flung off into oblivion.

Jason flipped on the turn signal and took the road to the left, turning away from the fog. Aaron let out a sigh and released the seat. No one told you not to drive through the fog in Raeford. You just didn’t do it.

Behind them, the truck that was following them turned too, away from the fog, and then turned around and went back the way it had come.

“Hey, man, are you sure we can’t head out today? I’ll wait while you shower.”

“No,” Aaron said. “No, I already told you. Don’t push me. I already don’t like this.”

“Okay. I’ll be there first thing. I mean as soon as the sun comes up.”

“Can’t I sleep in? I’ve had kind of a day, you know.”

“All right. Ten. I’ll be here at ten. And I’m sorry it has to be this way. Really sorry.”

And sorry about the tryouts. Sorry about the broken leg. Sorry about the doctor who barely looked at his face before he handed his mother the prescription for a highly addictive painkiller. Sorry for his neighbor who

had just a little more, if Aaron wanted, because he needed the money for cat food. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.

“It’s not your fault,” Aaron said.

“Yeah, I know.”

Aaron’s parents greeted them in the driveway. His father’s hands were in his back pockets, like he used to do when teenaged Aaron came home too late, or had snuck out to break barn windows with his friends. Behind them, the turquoise house had been painted badly over the yellow siding. The peeling paint made the wall looked speckled, like a robin’s egg. His mother had never quite got a hang on the gardens, so they sat empty except for garden gnomes and cement crosses.

Aaron’s father shook Jason’s hand as Aaron slowly crawled out of the car, deeply aware of how thin he was, how filthy, of the red, sore places on his arms and legs. He wasn’t very good at injecting yet, and it was a pain in the ass to get the anti-crush coating off the pills, but worth it for the more powerful high.

He tugged his sleeve, but it wasn’t long enough to cover anything. Shame became defiance in his stomach, and he tried to stand up straighter, failed, coughed, looked down again.

“I’ll be back for him tomorrow morning,” Jason said with a friendly smile. “Keep an eye on him.”

“Oh, we will.” Aaron’s mother laughed lightly—a laugh that was a crumbling battlement. A laugh that shook at the end like a leaf in the wind.

“And we’re going to see Brandon.”

“Not tonight, Aaron,” his father said. “He’ll be in bed by the time you’re cleaned up.”

That wasn’t true, or at least Aaron didn’t think it was true, but he didn’t know what time it was or what time Brandon went to bed. It was getting dark, but it was fall. It got dark so early now, so easily, so quickly. The town just fell into dark now, tumbled headfirst and shut its eyes.

He didn’t argue. If he argued they would all know how much he didn’t know about his own son.

“Yeah, you’re right,” he said instead.

“We’ll stop by on our way, tomorrow morning,” Jason promised.

“Thanks, man.”

Jason smiled and Aaron felt a flutter of warmth for the man. He thought of him again, bleeding in Angela’s car, his face falling as Angela told him there was no party—no reward for his pain—and Aaron took his hand, before he could think better of it, and Jason squeezed hard.

And then Jason was gone and the three of them, their little family, were alone inside the split-level, still decorated as it had been when Aaron was a kid, with pastel nautical designs—seashells in resin, white-painted driftwood and nets, a turquoise sign in the kitchen that read *my happy place*. Tin seagulls regarded him balefully from beside the hall tree. The only mismatches in the design were the guns over the fireplace and the small pile of World War II books beside the recliner.

“I’m glad you’re going,” his mother said. “I’m so glad.”

His father said nothing, and Aaron hugged his mom and went to his room, his teenage room, which looked the same as it had when he was sixteen and still wanted to join the air force or travel with his band in Alison White’s full-size van.

Behind him, his parents watched Jason’s battered cruiser drive up the road.

“You know, he’s awful nice for a—” he heard his dad say down the stairs.

“Dennis,” his mom cut him off, with that exasperated, slightly scolding voice she used when one of her family said something bad out loud. It was a toothless thing half-hidden behind a giggle, and Aaron had always hated her for it. He slammed the door.

His parents, left suddenly together in the front hall, immediately scattered to their separate rooms—his father to the living room and his mother to the kitchen. There was an empty chair in their soul, the near miss of a shared moment together—a moment that would have required conversation, not the usual, light gossiping they did so well, but an actual conversation about the weight and depth of the issues in their lives. If they had done so they would have realized one of them needed to go speak to

their son, really speak to him, drag out the damage and sins and darkness and bear the pain and, worse, embarrassment of the truth. *I'm sorry*, they might have to say, or *I'm afraid*, which would be much worse. He could imagine his father searching for the remote in the couch and his mother wiping down the counter again.

He hated them both for the chipped veneer of their kindness and the weakness underneath, even as they kept him alive—even as they kept his son alive. He hated their softness that held unyielding hardness. He hated himself for not accepting them as they were, for needing them to be perfect and hating them for pretending to be.

Up in his room, behind his closed door, he checked his pockets, but Jason had emptied them. He pulled open drawers, dragging his nails against the bottoms, stuffing his fingers into the corners, looking for scraps, anything, to get him through the night. Flotsam, wreckage, to get him through the night.

There was nothing.

CHAPTER 9

EMMA

The thing about the city was that it did not cease. Raeford had a tide of sounds, an ebb and flow of noise—birds and cars and people calling their horses and cattle in. There were church bells on Sunday and the putter of motors on fair days and the strange drone of wings when the vultures migrated through, but there were times when there was utter silence. Raeford went to bed. It became dormant. It waited.

The city was never dormant. It was a constant hum like the blood in her body, pushing and pushing and pushing and never fading away.

Emma had not yet decided if she liked it or not. The constant movement made her ache—the painful companion that had accompanied her most of her life, springing awake more often than it did in her hometown. The ache in her abdomen was waning, though, and she wasn't bleeding as much when she peed. But if she had to be in pain, she would rather do it in the city. She felt safer than she could ever remember, like a wounded zebra hiding in the heart of the herd. Surely it would be harder, in this crowd of sounds and smells and jittery movement, to pick her out and tear her apart.

And the punishment had not followed her there.

Not yet.

She felt relieved and guilty for feeling relief.

Had it found Ros yet? He should have run with her. But of course he wouldn't. Of course he went into the fucking stable and got the baby. He could have just let it go and then maybe everything would have been fine.

The jingle bells on the handle of the Shop n' Mart door tinkled merrily as she entered. The store was jumbled, the shelves stacked with everything from Spam to Cheerios to a brand of noodles Emma had never seen before and the package of which she could not read. There were stacks of things on

the endcaps: SpaghettiOs and toilet paper. Band-Aids and soy sauce. A tabby cat was curled on the torn plastic of a box of soup cans. It rolled over as she came in and kneaded its paws in the air.

“Hello,” she said to it, and then felt embarrassed.

“Hello!” a voice answered in the back of the store. “Is that Emma?”

Emma ran a hand along the cat as she walked by and the creature vibrated under her hand with a rumbling purr.

The woman at the back of the store was teetering on a stack of boxes, gingerly poking boxes of oatmeal into place on the highest shelf. Emma watched her in silence.

“Can I help?” she said eventually.

“Finally you ask!”

She climbed down and Emma climbed up, aware of how slow she was, and how stiff her joints felt. She wobbled at the top and the woman handed her boxes to carefully push onto the high shelf.

“So, you need a job?”

“Yeah. I saw your sign.”

“You got references?”

“Uh, no. I don’t really.”

“You from far away?”

“Yeah.”

That wasn’t really true, but it felt true.

“You run?”

“What?”

“You run.”

“Yeah.”

There was a little chirping noise at her feet and there was the cat, rubbing serpentines around the box she stood on. She smiled and felt strange about it. She stepped down and then bent over to scratch the cat’s ears. The little animal smiled as if in ecstasy.

“It’s eight dollars, no taxes,” the woman said.

“What?”

“What is the word? Under the table.”

Emma did some quick and messy mental math.

“When’s payday?”

The woman’s eyes narrowed, and Emma panicked as she felt the job, her freedom, her chance, slipping away from her, but the woman relaxed.

“Two weeks. Friday.”

That meant she had to rely on Daily for another four weeks. Four weeks of playing along with the old man while he paid her rent and held the looming threat of *a favor* over her head—of *whenever I call* over her head. It was better than nothing. Maybe she could make it.

“That’s great. Yeah.”

“Geu-Roo likes you and I trust him. He reads energy.”

“Oh, good.”

“See you tomorrow.”

“Thank you. Thank you!”

CHAPTER 10

MARSHALL

It was, writing-wise, a completely unsuccessful day, Marshall mused as she pulled into the hotel parking lot. She hadn't even really attempted to interview Roswell. That would usually cause her some kind of distress, guilt or anxiety, fear that the subsequent days would repeat this pattern and she would have nothing to take back to her editors, but she felt none of that. She felt tired, a familiar feeling, and a faded and boring kind of sadness built on a cracking foundation of anger. She'd felt that way for a long time. She would probably feel that way forever. Still, there was, peeking through the strangling, thorny vines, something—a glint.

There was a young man at the desk now, and Marshall caught his eye as she walked in.

“Did you get the possum?” she asked.

“What?”

“The possum, or whatever it was. It got stuck in the walls last night. It kept me up all night, screaming its head off.”

He looked down at the screen and prodded a few keys on the keyboard.

“I don't see anything about it here.”

Marshall's heart dropped. She really didn't think she could withstand another night in the screaming hotel. The young man noticed her distress. He smiled reassuringly and Marshall was a little impressed by his self-possession.

“It happens all the time. We're too close to the forest. Anyway, they probably had the guy in to fix it and didn't even make a note.”

Marshall frowned at him.

“Like I said, it happens a lot.”

He was young, Ros's age. Not a young man at all—just a boy. It was a small town. What were the chances this boy knew something?

"Hey, do you know Roswell Bently?"

"Yeah, he's like, two years younger than me."

"You heard what they're saying about him?"

"You mean that he fu—"

He stopped and his eyes widened. "Um, they say he had a baby with a horse."

Marshall raised her eyebrows.

"It's stupid," the boy said. "Everybody knows he had a baby with Emma Smith. They were together a lot and she got, you know, super pregnant and then suddenly not pregnant. It's just a mean thing to say. A lot of people don't like Ros."

"Huh. Why don't they like Ros?"

The boy shrugged.

"He's weird. All he talks about are horses, if he talks at all. You try to say hi and he just smiles at the floor."

"What happened to Emma?"

"She got out. Haven't seen her in weeks. Lucky her, you know."

Marshall nodded. The boy's smile didn't waver. So that was that. He just gave the whole thing to her with a smile. So many adults had spent so much of her time today leading her gently away from anything like an answer—foxfire in the fog, and here was a child just giving the whole thing up. She might as well go double or nothing.

"You know a guy named Aaron?"

"Yeah. My mom told me to stay away from him, but I didn't, like, need to be told that."

"Any reason he'd want to hurt Thomas?"

"Which Thomas?"

"The one with Iced Pine Bars."

"Oh, yeah. I don't think so. I think he's just kinda a mess."

"I got that impression, yeah."

“Daily hates him, though. Thomas and his family. Everyone knows that. My dad says he bets Daily shot Hershey and made it look like an accident.”

Well, news travels fast in Raeford, Marshall thought. *Folks already have theories.*

“Didn’t look like that to me, but I don’t know horses.”

“Yeah, me neither. Anyway, if you hear anything else, from the possum I mean, just let me know. We’ll take care of it.”

“The rooms are still full, aren’t they?” Marshall asked.

“Yeah, but there’s a sledgehammer in the shed. I’ll see what I can do.”

Marshall laughed, a barking sound, rusty and out of practice. She thanked him and carried the smile like a fragile thing all the way to the elevator. There it vanished as she pressed the buttons and thought about the horse, the dead body, the blood, the road, the naked man. This morning she’d thought this was all so simple, but she’d been wrong before. She recognized the tickle at the back of her brain—the curiosity that drove her.

Hello, old friend. It’s been a while.

The ancient elevator creaked up to the third floor and the doors screeched open.

The bodies were impossible. The deaths made no sense. She’d been to her fair share of small towns, and all of them were a little off in their own way. Unlike in the city, where the strangeness had room to disappear, to blend in with the background, here everyone knew everyone’s name and business, so it had no reason to be discreet. It was like a pet, kept and spoiled despite shitting on the carpet sometimes. Everyone shrugged and looked the other way and hoped someone cleaned it up.

Why was Luis here when there was money to be made somewhere else?

Easy. Someone was paying him to be here.

To kill a horse? No. He was killed first and left there. Hence the lack of blood.

Some kind of setup? Insurance for the horse? Framing Aaron? It certainly seemed like a lot of work to frame a man who was already clearly hanging on by a thread.

So something else then. Something she hadn’t yet learned.

Aaron was the obvious suspect, even though Daily seemed to have the motive.

At least she had time.

Her room was quiet, and she stood in the center of it, straining to hear anything suspicious—scratching, or, well, she didn't know. The sound of a creature in the walls, waiting patiently for her to drift off to sleep so it could scream. Finally, resolved that she wasn't going to be able to see inside the walls, she shrugged her coat into the chair and collapsed onto the bed.

She could not stop thinking about the bodies. They should have disgusted or repelled her, but she felt very analytical about the scene, now that she had some distance from it. She felt anesthetized, as she had for a long time. She'd seen bodies before, done the crime beat, rode along with police. She saw shooting victims in the corners of apartments or under shrouds. Once, while she was talking casually to a source on his whitewashed front porch, shots rang out and they'd both ducked inside, hiding behind his couch as if a few inches of stuffing and wire would keep them safe. Someone had died in that shooting, and when the police arrived and Marshall finally came out of the house, there was a woman screaming about it on one of the porches, and a child standing nearby, watching the lights of the car with wide, fascinated eyes.

That night she'd vomited and cried, Joseph sitting with her on the bathroom floor, rubbing her back and telling her *she* was okay. And Marshall loved him for that, even though she knew it was a lie, and that it was mostly to soothe himself, to ward himself and his wife from the bullets that had been very close to their fragile way of life. She hadn't even seen the body that time and yet it had affected her so much more than this.

She wondered what the body of their child had looked like. It had probably been too early to look like a body at all. She should have asked to see it. She should have been brave.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket. She made a face at the name on the screen, but accepted the call anyway. Carmen screamed at the other end.

"Carmen, please," Carlos said. "Marshall, did you catch the horses?"

Marshall didn't hear any mocking in his voice, but sensed that it was there. Or worse, pity. He was being gentle with her, and it made her want to feel his nose break under the heel of her hand.

She took a deep, ragged breath.

"Well, actually, I found something a little more interesting. One of the horses was dead, we found a man coming back from a bender, and another one who was probably murdered."

She explained the afternoon as concisely as possible, including her flimsy leads. There was a long silence on the other end of the phone that somehow managed to be disappointed.

"Carolyn Marshall, how did you manage to find a real story in this? I sent you to interview a teenage boy and a horse."

Marshall grinned. "Not my fault. It's all skill."

"Okay, well, thank you for ruining my plan, but maybe it's good that you're there after all. The stick thing is particularly weird. What's the next step?"

Marshall paused long enough to let Carmen scream. "Well, I think I want to touch base with the police and talk to Aaron if I can. But now I'm going to pass the fuck out."

"All right. I'll check in again. Try to stay out of trouble."

"No promises," she said, and hung up.

It's good that I'm here.

The thought surprised her.

It was, though. It was good she was in Raeford with its broken lights and chipping white churches and angry, closed-off citizens. She was curious about the place and curiosity felt so much better than anger—anger at waking, at driving to the office building, at stomping to her desk, at dragging her pen across her notepad in meetings, digging deep, black trenches in the paper until her editor asked if she needed a moment. This was better than that.

She lay back on the bed and let her vision blur, the cream-colored ceiling spreading and fading into pure, clean white.

The room was quiet that night, and so was the street below. The fog rolled into town from the cliffs, but that was normal for this time of year. If you stood in the center of that cloud, which no one ever did, you would have sworn you heard the sea, the waves crashing against the buildings in the night—a funny trick of the mind, like holding a shell to your ear.

CHAPTER 11

AARON

Aaron didn't sleep, or did he? Sleep and consciousness were beginning to lose their sharp distinctions. He was unmoored, drifting. He was in pain, of that he was certain. He dreamt he'd found a pill in the back of a drawer and, not knowing exactly what it was, crushed it and snorted it anyway, relieved to feel it lift him up up up to safety and then drop him again. He screamed in frustration. He rolled onto the floor. The bedding was already soaked in sweat. He was sinking into the ocean just below the crust of Raeford. He could feel the water in his lungs. When he woke, fully, he lay still and felt the buzzing in his bones, and the hunger, immediately, for some chemical to adjust his brain.

There was nothing, he knew. He'd already checked every nook and cranny. His memory was clearer now. The sleep and the pain sharpened it and he didn't like what he knew now, didn't like being conscious and bearing it. It took him excruciatingly long to summon the energy to call Daily, and when he did the call went directly to voicemail. Aaron cursed and dropped the receiver back down, then cursed again because it had made too much noise.

"Who are you calling, Aaron?" his mother called from the kitchen.

Aaron could hear the tremor in her voice, full of suspicion hidden behind that giggle. Her timidity made him hate her again, though that wasn't fair. He gritted his teeth.

"Jason. Seeing if he's on his way."

"I'm sure he'll be here as soon as he can. Your dad just left for work, but I made pancakes if you want one."

"Sure. What time is it?"

"Almost 5:30."

Sun would be up soon. He was trying to think, trying to figure out how to hide from Jason, how to get his oxy instead. Could he steal his mom's car? Then he'd have to deal with a stolen car, but that seemed like something that might work itself out, whereas the chemicals—the needing them—had to be solved immediately.

"I'm just going to grab a smoke real quick," Aaron said.

"Outside!"

"I know!"

Her keys were not hanging next to the door, and he cursed under his breath. They'd learned from last time, adapted to his habits of disappearing. He slammed the door behind him and stood under the tiny awning, looking at the ceramic geese on the neighbor's lawn, the last of the fog in drifts disappearing around their webbed feet.

He lit a cigarette and felt himself relax, a little, from the ritual. The carton, the fire, the smoke. He despaired, for a moment, that his life had come down to the simple coordination of chemicals through his body, a programmer sticking inputs into a machine. He inhaled and watched a truck turn down the road. Daily's truck. Speak of the devil, and all that.

Daily got out of the car and did a little jog to the front porch. He always looked like someone's granddad, ready to cheer him on at T-ball. He looked like a guy who did Boy Scouts on the weekend. He had an easy smile on a leathery face. The kind of guy who would say things like *I want my kids to have the life I didn't*. He probably even believed it, but John Daily was the devil, and Aaron knew that even as he shook the man's hand, let him pull him in for a hug. Jake, the old man's constant shadow, wasn't there—headed to school, probably, still making a show of that, as if he didn't have his future lined up, as if Daily didn't have plans for him.

"Hey, Mr. Daily."

"Aaron," Daily said, "we were worried about you. Everything go all right?"

"Yeah."

The night was a blur, but he felt certain, slightly certain, at least a little certain, that he had done what he was supposed to do.

“You let the horses out?”

“I let the horses out,” Aaron agreed.

“And led them to the forest?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I did that.”

He was starting to remember walking after the horses, making clucking noises when they slowed, blowing heat between his fingers, hunched against the wet cold.

He remembered the forest, looming ahead of him, a dark, jagged wall of trees against the gray sky. He remembered being afraid. He didn't understand horses, but got the vague feeling that they were afraid too. They moved fretfully, with quick, short movements, their ears flickering back at him and their heads held high. He remembered they tried to turn back once and he raised his arms, shocked when it worked and they started forward again.

One of the trees had stepped forward, shuddered, coalesced into a massive deerlike body, black-black against the blue-black of the trees. It creaked like hollow trees, like a rotting house, like dry bones.

The horses were really afraid now. A few of them, closer to Aaron, bolted into the night, crashing through the fence at the side of the road, but a few of them seemed frozen, confused to the point of shock.

It smelled like rotting meat and manure, wet pine needles, and, somehow, the approaching winter, the cold snap in the air, the end of things that grew and thrived in the warmth.

He'd been high. Daily had given him the stuff back at the house, a lot of it, which he thought was a little strange but didn't question. He'd had hallucinations before, but never like this.

He ran then, bolting down the road, back toward the stable, and then he stopped and remembered Daily, how he sounded when he was furious, the way his eyes burned into him, the threat of violence, the very real threat, vibrating through him. He remembered the known fear of death, and it overcame the unknown fear.

He went back, though every part of his body shook with fear, as if wire was threaded through his joints. He forced himself forward, unable to

ignore the noises in the darkness, the noises of animals fighting, of animals running, of animals crying. He slid on the blood on the grass, and caught himself. He saw it in a flash. Even in the darkness, his brain filled in the gaps in the violent picture, and then he ran again.

A shadow with antlers full of stars. Something growing in his stomach and then bursting out with knives on its hooves. He was burning up with fever. The seams of his clothes were fire. He pulled them off like wet leaves. The stars exploded into fever and vomit.

What of this did he imagine? There was no untangled web in his mind.

On the porch, there were tears running down Aaron's face. Daily smiled at him and wrapped him in another hug.

"It was all a bit of a mess. Didn't mean to hurt the animals. You know that. Complete accident. Don't blame yourself one little bit. You did good, son," Daily said, and Aaron wiped furiously at his face, feeling warm and comforted, despite the logical part of his mind screaming that this was a trick.

What about Luis? he wanted to ask, but he didn't dare.

"You're happy?" Aaron said, wanting to hear it, wanting to bask in it.

"You did very good," Daily said. "And I said I'd take care of you, right after, remember?"

"Yeah," Aaron said. He did remember. He hadn't known exactly what that meant, except that Daily was important and powerful and the kind of friend you wanted to have. He'd also hoped it meant oxy.

"Jason's coming," Aaron murmured.

"You want to wait for Jason?" Daily teased him.

"No," Aaron said, but it didn't matter.

Daily already had his hand on his shoulder, was already leading him down the stairs. Aaron was already in the car. They were pulling away. They were already gone.

CHAPTER 12

MARSHALL

Marshall dreamed of the sea, but not the vibrant aqua field, glittering under a golden sun. It was not even the gray and storming sea, the furious, crashing sea, the sea that lifted ships into the air and crushed them against its own body. It was the unfathomable sea, the heart of the sea, the sea as it saw itself—dark and deep and deep and deep and full of glowing, alien life. There was no sky and no earth. There was only the dark and the cold and the rippling of light from a source so far away it couldn't possibly be the sun.

Somewhere, she knew, there was another body in the water, behind her, far away but coming closer. She could not see it, could not hear it, could only sense the pressure of its movement, of a planet of water coming and going, swirling and dancing, displacing the blood of the titan Earth.

The thing was close now. She could hear its body move, creaking like a hinge, the cold sense of teeth in an opening mouth, and then the alarm went off, and she was awake and staring at a stained white ceiling that was not home.

“Joseph?” she mumbled, because surely Joseph was just in the bathroom, getting a glass of water.

Embarrassment flooded her, replacing the last lingering puddles of fear, and then a wave of old, sour grief. She remembered, vividly, standing before the hospital reception desk, in line, practicing the words over and over in her head as if the woman behind the desk was going to interrogate her rather than hand her a visitor badge.

I'm here to visit my husband, she practiced, staring at the stylized seahorses and turtles and jellyfish painted behind the reception desk. The whole hospital was ocean-themed, even though they were thousands of

miles from the nearest ocean, surrounded by pavement and steel beams and glass and, somewhere beyond that, cornfields and soybeans. She figured they thought it was relaxing, but it just reminded Marshall of the things she wouldn't be able to do with Joseph—see the ocean, for one. *I'm here to visit my husband. I'm here to visit my husband. I'm here to visit my husband.*

She should have told him. Maybe he would have talked her out of it.

Give it a try, so you have something of me.

The relief she felt in response made her sick.

She rolled out of bed, went into the bathroom (the empty bathroom, where Joseph was not) and got a glass of water. She was awake now, and might as well stay awake. Maybe she should say the hell with the story and go hiking, or just go home and stay in the empty house with Joseph's coats hanging in the closets and his shoes sitting by the front door. Or she could stay here. She could stay here and see if the time helped at all.

She made black coffee in the stained coffee pot in the bathroom and smoked on her way to the truck. To Marshall's surprise, the hunk of junk started compliantly. She didn't trust the old, rattling machine, but it had, so far, been reliable, as if it was on its best behavior for company.

Her phone obediently navigated her between gray buildings and blobby people, and Marshall thought, uncharitably, *I am driving past the dregs left in the cup.*

Joseph used to swirl his tea and hold the cup out to her and say, "You can see people's futures in tea leaves, you know. What do you see?"

"Come on, Joseph."

"Humor me. What do you see?"

She glared dramatically at the bottom of the Snoopy mug.

"Immense immaturity."

"Carolyn!"

"Sorry. Sorry. A dog barking up a tree, but it's the wrong tree."

"You're the worst."

But he was laughing, and then she was laughing.

The police station was also gray, and looked about as inviting as a bear trap, but she'd seen worse. The desk at the door looked like it had been built

when disco was all the rage. There was no one behind it, but there were several piles of mail on the corner, shoved under a marble horse head that read *In Memoriam Sergeant Crackers*.

She walked down the hallway and into a room that could charitably be called an open office, with five desks so close together it would be hard to walk between them, the journey made more difficult by folding chairs left here and there, some covered with piles of folders, laptops, and one discarded pistol. There were heavy metal doors at the back of the room, which she assumed led to the cells or storage or maybe the vending machine. She marched up to an ancient, army-green desk with a donut of a man behind it. His badge said *Pots*.

“Excuse me,” Marshall said, smiling her most gracious and harmless smile. “I wondered if I could talk to someone about the terrible thing that happened in the field.”

“Are you a witness? Because otherwise I’m busy,” the cop said, and Marshall immediately regretted talking to him.

He didn’t sound like the warm, picket-fence-and-coffee-at-the-diner kind of cop she was hoping for. But then, why had she expected anything good from Raeford?

“No, I’m a reporter. I’d like to interview someone on record about the investigation.”

“Investigation is a junkie’s gonna junkie,” the man at the next desk behind Pots stage-whispered to the room.

“Yeah right,” said the single uniformed woman. “Like it’s gonna be hard to solve that one.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Pots said, and the room did, though not immediately. There were a few stifled giggles that lingered for several seconds. “We do not give official statements on ongoing investigations.”

“Sounds like it’ll be closed pretty soon,” Marshall said.

“God willing and the creek don’t rise, ma’am.”

“A few people told me they thought John Daily might be involved.”

Pots scoffed. “Daily? Why the hell would Daily get involved in this mess?”

“Some folks seemed to think he had reason to be angry at Thomas’s family.”

“That old fight? Ridiculous. Not everyone carries grudges around in their pockets here. Look, a lot of folks are mad at John Daily because he’s a bit of an asshole, and I respect that, but he wrangles these kids that would be out breaking windows and stealing cars otherwise. This town got nothing to offer them, but that old man might. At least they have a roof over their heads. At least someone is checking they get in at night. He’s even paying rent for some of them in the city. He’s not a good man, but he’s the *right* man, you get what I mean? He’s not fucking around in fields at night.”

This was the most Pots had said about anything so far, and he’d said it about a man no one else had a single nice word for. Marshall could feel herself wanting to tilt her head, like a curious puppy, but she resisted.

“Sounds like he’s doing his best. So, you’re sold on Aaron?”

“We do not give official statements on ongoing investigations.”

The cop behind Pots grinned at his coffee cup and snorted.

“I see.”

Marshall had the sense she was being watched and looked up to lock eyes with Jason, who had just walked in through one of the doors at the back of the room. His hands were full of a laptop and several folders, with a coffee cup balanced precariously on top, and he was looking from her to Pots and back again.

“Well,” Marshall said. “If you have any comment, here’s my card. I guess I’ll head to the diner for a bit if there’s nothing else.”

“You have yourself a great day,” Pots said.

She left the way she came in, tapping Sergeant Crackers on the head on the way out, and drove to the diner. It was empty except for a few very old men, none of them Daily, and two waitresses, one of them Carter. She locked eyes with the woman and held up two fingers. Carter nodded and brought two cups of coffee over to the booth in the corner.

“Big Dave again?”

“Sounds good.”

Jason showed up about twenty minutes later, looking sheepish, as if he was walking into detention and hoped his mom never found out. He nodded at Marshall and walked over to her booth, giving the diner a quick scan over his shoulder as he sat down.

Wears his heart on his sleeve, this one, Marshall thought.

“Ms. Marshall,” he said, tipping a hat that wasn’t there. “Nice to see you here.”

“Quite a coincidence,” Marshall said, because she couldn’t help it.

Jason ignored the tease. “What are you up to today?”

“Oh, you know, just looking into a murder. Normal Monday stuff. How about you?”

“Okay, I think we can drop the...whatever it is we’re doing. You saw what I saw at the station.”

“Sure did. Looks like a group of people who have made their minds up.”

“That’s what I thought. And I wondered if you weren’t ready to quite give up on the story yet.” Jason’s voice was pleading.

“Well, I don’t know Aaron, but I saw him in that field and he did not strike me as a man able to, let alone inclined to, murder a man in cold blood.”

“He’s not. He’s absolutely not. Aaron was my...like my brother growing up, and I can’t help but feel responsible for where he is now. He’s fucked up, but he doesn’t deserve this.”

“You have to admit it’s pretty suspicious. What was he doing there?”

“I know how it looks but there must be more to it.”

“How sure are you?”

“I’m sure.” He looked her in the eyes, and she believed him.

At least she believed that he believed.

“Fine. I’ll see what I can do.”

He smiled. Maybe the first warm smile she’d seen in Raeford.

“What are you going to do next?” he asked.

Marshall thought of the paper in her pocket.

“I have a few leads.”

“You should try the vet, if your boss needs you to still work on the horse story. She would have delivered the foal.”

Marshall opened her mouth to thank him, but assure him she wasn't on the horse story anymore. Then she closed it and furrowed her brow. She couldn't help it. She was curious, and what was one more quick stop?

“So there *was* a foal?”

“She said Agatha called her out that night,” Jason said. “Now, I don't know why everyone's being so cagey about all this but seems to me that prized pony of theirs lost a foal and they thought they might make some money from a story. You get a good quote from the vet, you can tie that up and...”

“And help you boys out?”

“It's worth a shot. No one else seems to care.” Jason shrugged and looked deeply into his coffee.

“Meanwhile, what's your plan?” Marshall asked.

“I bailed Aaron out and he agreed to go into rehab. If he's in treatment they're less likely to go after him. Most of the guys just want things quiet, so if I can put him somewhere quiet that'll buy us all time. Hell, maybe treatment sticks and this all blows over by the time he's out. Miracles happen.”

“What happens to Luis?”

“Luis Collazo? They'll contact immigration, see if they can get ahold of family, but...”

“But?”

Marshall let the silence draw out. She sometimes got people to talk just because they had to fill the silence. It made them uncomfortable.

“But no one's going to really take care of him. They're not really seen as part of the town.”

“Migrants?”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe I'll add that to my growing list of investigations.”

“Careful. Don't turn over too many stones.”

“Don't tell me what to do.”

He gave her another warm grin, fished a bill out of his pocket, and tucked it under the coffee cup. After he was gone, Carter wandered over to retrieve it.

“You out to cause more trouble today?”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Well, I’d offer to go with you, but I’m stuck here today. If Agatha kills you, it’s not my fault.”

Marshall glanced down at the woman’s bulging stomach, without meaning to.

“Go ahead,” Carter said.

“I don’t—”

“Go ahead!”

“When are you due?”

“Not soon enough!” Carter cackled. “But seriously, my feet are killing me. No one tells you how much everything hurts leading up! You know pregnancy makes your ligaments loosen? Your spine changes shape! My doctor’s telling me all this stuff and rolling her eyes, like *don’t you know this stuff already?* Like I should have some kind of instinct to warn me that my feet are going to get bigger in the third trimester. And I guess that gets worse. Don’t even get me started on episiotomies.”

Marshall had no idea what an episiotomy was, and she had no idea what to say. What was the next line in the script? She blinked helplessly and Carter grinned down like a child holding a bug over their sibling’s head.

“Not what I wanted to do at my age. Sure, thought I was safe from this kind of stuff.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m kind of excited, honestly. New chapter and all that. No idea who’s going to watch it, but if Ros can figure it out, I’ve got a chance. You got any kids?”

“Nah. Not for me.”

The words made her feel relief, and relief made her feel guilt.

“Ah, well, you never know what might happen.”

“That’s true,” Marshall said, and Carter, taking pity on the woman, nodded and left her to her coffee.

CHAPTER 13

BRITTANY

Brittany made herself small, a skill that she had honed over a decade. What was once a shaky cringe was now the art of the graceful arc—the curve of her back, her elbows pulled in close, her head bent. Small. Small. Small. She wanted to be a hedgehog. She wanted to be a worm. She wanted to dig down deep in the loam and live a life there.

She was eligible for a free breakfast, and as much as she wanted to avoid the crowded cafeteria, she needed to eat, so she piled food on her tray and hid in the corner, drawing horses and chewing a rubbery bear claw. She started with the ears, always the ears. That's where horses started communicating. Forward in curiosity, back in anger, flopping gently when they were calm. She was obsessed with their ears. She was obsessed with the idea that she might be able to understand—to communicate with them. She wanted to understand them like Ms. Agatha did, like Ros did.

Next came the neck, the head, the chest. The legs were hard, and they were always a little too long or too short. She took extra care with the tails, picturing long, flowing, beautiful hair that she would lovingly pull burs out of, brush gently, braid perfectly, beautifully straight.

"You smell like dirt," someone said to her.

She looked up, blinking through the fugue of her art.

"What?" she said, but she was quickly realizing it was too late. It didn't matter what she said, because this boy wasn't actually trying to communicate with her. He was trying to hurt her.

"You smell like dirt and piss."

There were three of them, dressed like her brother dressed, in plaid over sports T-shirts. Two of them had matching sets of smattering freckles and the same lank brown hair.

“What’re you drawing?” the smallest boy said, and his voice sounded almost kind, as if he was genuinely curious.

“Horses,” Brittany said, because some part of her mind wouldn’t let her be rude enough to ignore them.

“You fuck horses?” the first boy said.

She blinked rapidly at him. It’s not like no one had said something like this to her before. There seemed to be some obsession with sexualizing her. Since she was old enough to understand human speech, it seemed like there was someone reminding her that there was a hole between her legs and people who wanted at it, or that she should want at it, or that she should want to put things inside it. She never knew how to respond to it. It seemed like a madness shared by the whole world and excluding her.

“That’s why you like them so much, right? Got those big dicks?”

Her mouth hung open, but she didn’t cry. His eyes darkened.

He lunged for her hand and crushed her fingers around her pen for a moment, yanking it free. She squeaked in pain and then in horror as he pressed the pen hard enough to break the paper and then, in a confident stroke, added a penis to the sketched horse.

The two boys behind him burst into laughter as he threw the pen at her feet.

Brittany felt the tears coming, and hated them, and hated the boys, and something deep in the loam called to that feeling, like a bird calls to its flock. There was a click like a key in a lock.

“I’m going to tell the forest about you,” she whispered.

“What?” the boy said, a joke in his voice.

She looked up into his eyes, her fury blotting out the room. She could hear only a roar, like her bones were screaming to leave her skin. Black spots crowded at the edge of her vision like leaves closing over the sky.

“I will,” she said. “I’ll tell the forest about you.”

She could barely hear herself. How dare she? How dare she speak up and make herself big again—crawl out of the mushrooms and pine needles and stare up at the hunting owl? The violence would come now, she was

sure of it. But something was building in her—a wave. It was a wave made of fury that wasn't just hers.

“Whatever,” he said, and the two other boys, sensing weakness, laughed in a way that showed too many teeth.

They left her.

And the world changed, just a little.

CHAPTER 14

MARSHALL

Marshall's phone gave her simple directions to the vet's office, but Marshall didn't really need them. And that was good, because her connection was shit. Anyway, the town wasn't large, and there was a very large sign outside the large-animal vet. There were two pastures around it. The single horse in the near pasture had a shaved square on the side of his neck and something pink and white wrapped around one leg. He looked at her brightly and made a quiet noise as she stepped out of her truck. She didn't know if she should pet him. Did horses need to be protected from germs? Did she have horse germs? She had no idea. The horse made a slightly louder noise as she turned away from him, clearly upset that he had been denied attention.

Marshall paused and considered going back to pet him, but as she looked up at his head, she realized that she was a little afraid of him. She'd never really been around horses, except a few at the county fair, and those were ponies half napping in a pen. This was a workhorse, huge and stocky and built with power in his bones. He was intimidating, to say the least, and Marshall decided he was fine over there.

The large-animal vet's office was a barn, because of course it was, but somehow the sight baffled Marshall. She had expected a horse-sized hospital with white walls and silver examination tables the size of cars. Instead, she walked through the front door into a very small waiting room with a desk and a few chairs. There was straw scattered across the carpet. It was cold, despite a space heater whirring in the corner. The place smelled like disinfectant and sawdust. There was an enormous, Plexiglas window set into the wall with a curtain pulled to one side, ready to be quickly dropped should something beyond the window be unfit for the people in the waiting room. Beyond the window was a very clean barn, exceedingly

clean, but still a barn, with stalls and a cement walkway. Plastic buckets were stacked neatly in the corner and Marshall could clearly make out a bag of carrots sitting on a low table beside a massive syringe.

She watched as two women led a spotted horse out of a stall and tied him in the middle of the aisle, a rope on each side of his head. The horse looked unstable, swaying as if standing on the deck of a ship. They ran their hands up and down his legs, mumbling something to each other. One of them, straightening and brushing her hands off, noticed Marshall in the window and waved her in. Gently, unsure if the noise or movement would frighten the horse, Marshall opened and closed the heavy metal door to the barn. The woman who waved her in, who was not the vet she had met the day before, gestured more energetically for her to come forward.

“Hi,” the younger woman said. “Sorry about your wait. Can we help you?”

“Oh, I’m just here to talk to the doctor.”

At that, the woman squatting next to the horse glanced up, her face tight with concentration and irritation at being interrupted, but she gave her a nod. Marshall recognized her as the vet she’d met the previous day.

“You know anything about horses?” the vet asked.

The younger woman caught Marshall’s eye and gave her a little apologetic shrug.

“Not a thing.”

“Come down here,” the vet said.

This is a test, Marshall thought. She wants to see if I’m too good to do this, to do the things she does every day.

Marshall knelt, feeling the stiffness of her body, of her age, of sleeping in an unfamiliar bed.

“Run your hands along here,” the vet said, sliding her hand tightly against the horse’s ankle.

Marshall reached past her, trying to dismiss her fear that the horse would somehow sense that she was an imposter and that she didn’t know what she was doing. She imagined, in graphic detail, her face caved in by a horse’s hoof.

She ran her hand along the leg, the thin coarse hair hiding the geography of the horse, the bumps and skin, the mountains and valleys of sinew that meant nothing to Marshall.

She glanced at the vet. What was it she was supposed to be doing?

“Now,” the vet said, without looking at her, “feel this one.”

Marshall did a sort of squatting crab walk across the floor and reached for the other leg. She pressed her palm against the horse’s leg and immediately felt the difference. It was hot, noticeably so, like feeling the blazing fever on Joseph’s forehead.

“*Will I live?*” she remembered him joking.

No.

“It’s hot,” she said.

Not as hot as Joseph, but still hot.

“Yes,” the vet said, clearly pleased. “Still hot.”

She stood and Marshall stood with her, thankful to be away from the hooves.

The vet scribbled something on a sturdy-looking clipboard. “It’s evidence of an injury and it’s making me nervous. Heat can kill an infection, but it also breaks down connective tissue. Connective tissue damage can cause their bones to sink. Heat can literally take a horse apart.”

“Will he be all right?”

“I don’t know,” the vet said. “We’ll do our best.”

She stuck out her hand, filthy, covered in hair and dirt. Another test, Marshall supposed. She shook it. “Sorry I didn’t introduce myself yesterday, I was a little overwhelmed. I’m Carolyn Marshall.”

“Gina Foster,” the vet said. “It was fairly overwhelming, the whole situation, and a real tragedy.”

She turned to the young woman and nodded. “Let’s try the ice wrap. It certainly can’t hurt, and call Blake and tell her the swelling’s gone down but we’re gonna need another night. That’s some good news we can give her.”

“Thomas seemed upset,” Marshall said, as she watched the beautiful horse walk slowly and shakily away from them. Its left hip dipped deeply with every step.

“Thomas gets attached,” Dr. Foster agreed. “Some of these men, it’s all dollar signs to them, and I think Thomas tries to pretend that’s how he feels. But he’s not just a businessman. He’s got a soft heart.”

“Is that a disadvantage?”

She wanted to keep the conversation going, to show interest, to get the vet to like her or, failing that, at least not dislike her.

“I appreciate it, I suppose, but it’s easy to go broke on a lost cause. I suppose there’s something to say about horsemen not wanting to appear weak. In any case, we’ve got one of his outside. Most people would have let him go, and he’ll never be 100 percent again.”

“Oh, yeah, I met him. I think he was upset I didn’t pet him.”

“Yeah, he’s a lover. Thomas bought him out of a field, 200 pounds underweight, teeth overgrown, forgotten in a pasture until the man who owned him died and his son showed up.”

“He was abandoned? Horrible,” Marshall said.

“There’s often two tragedies, at minimum, when you save an animal: the owner and the animal. Sometimes they’re both broken, both suffering, if you understand.”

Marshall nodded.

“He lived through that first night, and that’s always a very good sign.”

She walked to a room in the back with a sink, and Marshall followed. The vet washed her hands and started making notes on a whiteboard, already filled with truly inscrutable notes.

“Well, obviously,” Marshall joked.

“That’s not what I meant. Sometimes the moment they’re rescued they crumble. Some animals endure anything. Then the moment you make them comfortable, they seem to settle into death like a sigh. You have to watch them the most when things start to get good. That’s when you lose them.”

“I’d never heard that before.”

“It’s what I’ve seen in my experience,” Foster said. “But that’s not what you came here to talk about.”

“No. The young officer—Jason? He said you were called out the night Phillip was born, or made his appearance.”

“Oh, did he?”

“Yes. He said that you probably went out for a foal and that it died and Agatha didn’t want anyone to know.”

“Ridiculous. Officer McDermott—Jason—doesn’t know the first thing about horses. That’s usually required for respect around here, but his great-grandfather was a leader in the community, and his family seems to have inherited that mantle like some kind of genetic disease. Unfortunate.”

“You don’t think he lives up to it?”

“He does his best.”

Marshall winced.

“Agatha wouldn’t care if she’d lost a foal. Well, that’s not fair. She’d be heartbroken, but it happens. No one would judge her for that. For that matter, the first time you heard about a foal wouldn’t be the day it was born. It takes almost a year to make a horse.”

“So what did happen?”

“It was all over by the time I got there. I don’t know what happened. I wasn’t part of it.”

“And that’s all?”

Dr. Foster considered her, and Marshall, who genuinely liked the woman, who had felt a strange lightness in her heart talking to her, now felt a weight settle on her, on the vet too, on the whole room, the whole town. That regard held a history she did not understand. She felt that the doctor was taking a measurement of her soul, of her goodness, of her trustworthiness. She remembered the story of the Egyptian god who measured the dead’s hearts against a feather. How did he measure? What could Dr. Foster see in her?

Foster nodded and Marshall felt relieved, though she had no way to know what about her the vet found satisfactory. She had no sense of why the woman would trust her, of all people. Maybe it was because she was a stranger, someone from outside the insular town who might react to the story with the proper awe or fascination or horror. Maybe Dr. Foster’s neighbors, if she had tried to tell them the story, had simply told her that was the way it was, or shrugged, or wandered away. There seemed to be a

lot of things people in Raeford did not talk about, and Marshall was starting to get the feeling that her presence was both a frustration and a relief—someone who was listening.

“I don’t believe all the stories, things in the forest, sacrifices, all that,” Dr. Foster continued, “but I’ve heard them all my life. And I—do you know what this is?”

She opened the other horse’s stall and ran a hand along a rough patch on the horse’s flank, a black, curdled mass that Marshall at first thought was a patch of mud on the otherwise clean horse, but now saw was a part of its skin.

“What is it?”

“A scar,” Dr. Foster said. “We call it *proud flesh* when a scar grows beyond where it is needed. The body overreacts—the irritation drives it to make too much tissue, to overcompensate. Seems like something like that. I was seven when my great-grandmother died, and she would cross herself before walking through fog and leave milk and sugar out on the back porch on snowy nights and put a candle in the window during thunderstorms. She was a practical woman, but she believed these things. There was a girl when I was younger, Linda Grayson—they said those things about her too, but I never believed it.”

Marshall nodded. She had questions, a lot of questions, but she didn’t want to interrupt—didn’t want to break the spell.

“I just want you to understand, I’m not going to speculate. I don’t have theories here. I don’t have opinions.”

Marshall waited.

“Here is what I’ll say—what I am prepared to say, which is only the truth. I arrived after it all happened. Agatha took me back to the barn. She said Ros took care of it, mostly. The boy helped me deliver foals before. I wasn’t concerned. There was quite a bit of blood, and, when I examined Rosie, she had clearly given birth, but there was no foal.”

She paused and narrowed her eyes, as if to see if Marshall was still listening, as if Marshall could do anything but listen.

“There was just Ros, and the baby. Just a human baby. I told them I couldn’t help with that. Take him to the hospital, I told them. There was a horse that gave birth. There was a baby. That’s all I can say.”

CHAPTER 15

JASON

Jason McDermott stood on the porch and looked at the cigarette butt on the ground. The front door was open, because Aaron's mother had left it open, expecting him to follow her inside, but he didn't. He stood on the porch and watched her snatch her phone off the table and desperately dial her husband. He wouldn't be able to answer, of course, on the factory floor.

Her panic was too late, he thought. She hadn't even noticed Aaron was gone until he'd knocked on the door. She was pacing now, around the oak dining room table, straightening the lace tablecloth as she redialed. Jason turned away from her and looked back down at the discarded cigarette on the stoop—that stupid, fucking cigarette butt, still smoking, a tiny red light shining at him from inside the gray, cooling ash.

“Fuck,” he whispered to the cigarette.

Where the hell would Aaron go? There were a few shady places he could look—the Flinthook Bar, the underpass, the empty utility garage. But Aaron was too smart to linger there. The only people who landed in those places were the ones too tired to move on.

He must've been picked up. Probably by Daily. There were a few small dealers in Raeford, but everyone knew Daily had the monopoly. If someone scooped Aaron up, it was him.

Maybe he could just wait until the old man walked into the diner, drag him out to the parking lot, and beat the shit out of him until he spit out blood and where Jason could find his friend.

He crushed that idea like the cigarette under his heel.

Jason McDermott knew which men hit their wives and the children that stole from their parents. He knew a woman who had ten thousand dollars in a jar under her basement stairs and several that shoplifted to feed their

grandkids. Often, he had to force himself to walk away from what he really wanted to do—break in the door, whisk away the frightened wives, jail the selfish children, kill the people who sold poison. But he couldn't, he told himself. He could not. He was not able. If he was going to throw away his life on a cause, it had better be a good one. The problem was that they all felt like good causes, and there were so many, and he had only one life.

His fury roiled in him like a trapped snake, and he clenched both fists as he stared at the tip of his shoe, crushing the ash into the cracked concrete. He could drive past every house in town, just in case he saw Aaron outside, catching a smoke, or walking, or throwing up onto the grass. Then he could at least talk to his friend and try to convince him to come with him. On the other hand, Aaron might bolt if he saw him coming. He'd done it before and of course he would. Maybe he should have explained the whole plan to him—stressed how important it was to lay low until the rest of the police moved on.

No. That would have definitely made him run. And nothing could be better evidence of his guilt.

Love and fury filled him like a cup of broken glass.

Right on time, Aaron's mother appeared in the doorway, holding the phone like a rosary, her pink mouth downturned and her eyes wide and wet.

"I don't know what to do. I just don't know what to do."

"I'll go look for him. You give me a call if he comes back."

"Do you think he'll come back?"

"He might," Jason lied.

CHAPTER 16

MARSHALL

Marshall remembered the way to Agatha's stable better than she thought, and the truck, while loud, was easy to drive. She was even beginning to recognize a few horses at the major intersections. Two of them watched her as she waited for a light, and she waved at them. She was overacting, even now, even alone, being the professional, the people person. She was playacting for the horses.

Stop it, she told herself. Get on your game.

She looked back at the friendly horses and saw that one of them had those eyes—those human eyes. Not blue this time, but somehow possessing a human awareness. It did not look at her. It studied her. The horse raised its head a little and the eyes widened, as if seeing the recognition in her face and thinking, *Maybe*.

Ridiculous.

The conversation with Foster had shaken her. Even as she told herself it was ridiculous, childish, she kept checking her mirror, unable to shake the feeling that something was riding along with her, curled in the bed of the truck, or running along the road behind it.

She did not look back at the horse.

The GPS listed the Bentlys' place as *Foxglove Farm*, though Marshall didn't see a sign of any kind. She wondered how old the name was. Agatha's truck wasn't in the driveway, and one of the horse trailers was gone too, the big red one. A waste of time, then. She pulled into the driveway to turn around and saw someone in the doorway, halfway out, as if she'd just caught him leaving. Her curiosity was suddenly overwhelmed with guilt. Was she really going to bother this boy just to get to the bottom

of something so trivial? Would she ever be able to forget it if she didn't? She sighed at her own ridiculousness.

Well, she might as well get this over with.

He stood on the steps and waited for her to climb out of the truck. She gave him a wave she hoped was disarming. It didn't seem to work. He came down the stairs carefully, like a startled deer, and stood in a puddle waiting for her to arrive.

"Hey, Ros," she said. "Where's your mom?"

"Fairgrounds," he said. "The girls have their first show tomorrow morning. They wanted time to practice."

"In the middle of the week?"

Ros smiled a little, the shadow of a smirk. "I'm shocked they don't cancel school for it. Priorities, you know?"

"Ah. Just you and the baby today?"

"I dropped him off at daycare. There's a daycare at school."

Marshall considered what that said about the teen pregnancy rate of Raeford.

"Why aren't *you* at school?"

He looked guilty. She smiled conspiratorially, and he smiled back. He so desperately wanted camaraderie, she thought, even if it was from someone he knew wanted something from him.

"You want to do the interview now?" Ros asked.

The question sounded weary, but not upset. He seemed resigned more than anything.

"Nah, fuck it," Marshall said.

Ros blinked.

"Look, they didn't really send me out to do a story on you. I mean, they did, but it's not the kind of thing my paper does. Even if I wrote it, it would probably end up in a folder somewhere marked *fill space*."

She hadn't meant to say that. Radical honesty sometimes did shock a story out of someone, but that wasn't her strategy. Maybe Ros had shaken something in *her*.

“I’m mostly here because my husband died, about a month ago, and I wouldn’t take any time off and I probably fucked up a lot at work, so they wanted to get rid of me for a week.”

“Oh,” said Ros. “I’m really sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

Her voice was becoming strained. It was entirely inappropriate to be this emotional, especially in front of a kid. It was unprofessional and irresponsible to put this grief on him, to expect him to react appropriately. She had to pull herself together, but instead, as she took a deep breath, the air seemed to tear at her resolve like a sail in a storm. A sob escaped her, and to her deep and immeasurable shame, she felt tears welling in her eyes.

Roswell reached out and set a hand gently on Marshall’s upper arm, just enough to steer her, and led her the twenty feet or so to the barn. Rosie was there, tied by her halter in the aisle, lazily cleaning stray hay off the floor.

Marshall was crying by now, just a little, in that quiet, frustrated way she’d seen other people cry who wanted to stop and couldn’t. She’d always thought herself better than that. She was colder, more controlled, more serious. Roswell left for a moment and returned with a small basket of brushes, handed one to Marshall, and began to brush the little bay horse.

“I was going to go riding,” Ros said. “Since no one’s here. I was going to go check the trails. Do you want to come with me?”

“I don’t know how to ride.”

“No, I know. I’ll pick someone for you that’s easy. We’ll just go for a walk. You just have to hold on.”

Marshall felt like she should say yes, if only to make up for her embarrassing display. She was angry at herself for breaking, even if it had only been for a few minutes. She was angrier still for burdening this boy and perhaps ruining the tenuous relationship she’d formed with him. And yet, she couldn’t help but feel unburdened. She couldn’t help but notice that the thorns had retreated and there was a sky above her again.

“You could usually take Rosie. She’s a good babysitter, but the vet said to give her six weeks.”

“This is the one that—that gave birth?”

“Yeah, she’ll be okay,” Roswell said.

He wasn’t looking at her. He was adjusting the bridle in his hands.

“But I can put you on Charger. Don’t worry. It’s just a name. He used to be a jumper, but now he’s what Mom calls a *lawn ornament*.”

Marshall missed most of what he said next, something about an injury. She was looking at the small horse in front of her, a fluffy creature with a brown body and a black mane and tail. The horse considered her with an unsettling intelligence, or Marshall was imagining it again?

“If only I could interview you,” she said to the horse.

Rosie didn’t answer.

Ros appeared with another horse, a gray one whose back was bowed and who leaned its head against the boy whenever they stopped, pushing at him with its nose until Ros scratched behind its ears. Marshall took over his ear scratching duties so Ros could tack the horse. He lifted its hooves and dug out dirt and rocks with a pick. He pushed its head around with easy confidence and affection.

“Just hold one rein when you lead him,” Ros told her, handing her an entire 1,600-pound horse on a glorified string.

Marshall took the rein like it might have been electrified.

“If he tries to move away from you, give a quick snap, like you’re setting a line. Have you ever fished?”

She nodded, still staring at the enormous creature Ros had abandoned to her incompetence.

“Yeah, like setting a line. Don’t try to pull him if he takes off. He’s stronger than you. He’s a horse.”

It seemed like an obvious thing, but she was grateful for the advice nevertheless.

He gave her a helmet that looked like it had seen several generations. There were the remnants of a glittery tyrannosaurus sticker on the back. She tried on several extra pairs of boots in the back room, watched by two furious-looking black cats. The boots were nearly destroyed, full of holes and cracks and caked in mud, but one pair fit, and she pushed her loafers

carefully under a bench. Looking back as she left the room, she noticed that one of the black cats had curled up on top of them.

Ros led her to a set of stairs in a corner of the driveway, behind the house, where a horse much bigger and shinier than the one beside her waited for him.

Ros walked up the stairs. The horse positioned itself on the other side, and he lifted himself over easily.

It took Marshall quite a bit longer.

Charger didn't want to cooperate with the stairs, and didn't want to stand still as she got her foot in the stirrup. He didn't protest with any great energy. He simply stepped away, keeping just out of her reach, or swung his butt away from her, so she would have to jump to get on him. She felt like an absolute and complete fool, and yet each time she failed, she felt her determination set harder. She was going to make it on the horse or they were all going to starve there as she tried over and over and over.

Ros watched her tribulations patiently from atop his horse. Finally, Charger paused just long enough beside her that she was able to get a foot in a stirrup and launch herself on top of him before he moved away. Marshall heard a distressed noise as she straightened herself, but she had no idea if it was her or the horse.

Ros was unfazed. "Okay! Charger should just follow Penny, but right rein turns right, left turns left. You got it. Pull both to stop. Keep your shoulders back and your legs pushed down. Kick if you want to go faster."

It was then that Marshall began to panic. She was much higher off the ground than she'd expected, and Charger started moving of his own volition without any input from her. She was sitting on a monster—a creature that might destroy her and never think twice about it. It could be an accident. It could occur in the regular course of going about its day. It would never think of her again.

The only time she'd felt fear quite that flavor was the day Joseph convinced her to go on a cruise and the ship had hit bad weather. She'd thrown up, pretty much constantly, and made the mistake of looking out on the furious sea—the gray and deep blue waves that would swallow her

without a second thought, not from fury or hatred, but the way she might swallow a mote of dust.

He'd never gotten her on a boat again.

"I definitely don't want to go faster."

Ros turned Penny and started toward the woods, and Charger followed without a signal from Marshall. She was grateful for that, but also deeply unsettled that the animal had an agenda of its own and wasn't remotely interested in her input.

The movement of the horse under her was something entirely new. She'd never experienced anything quite like it, the gentle rocking, the power. She was aware that the horse could, at any moment, explode into motion and she would be flung to the ground. The fear made her stiff, but the constant rocking of the horse fought against this very stiffness.

She could not sit still and obsess. She had to breathe. She had to allow her hips to bend, her spine to turn, her shoulders to sway. By the time they broke the tree line, it was easier.

"Did they ever get the possum out?" Ros asked.

"Huh?"

"Of the wall. Did they get the possum out of the hotel wall?"

"Oh. I don't know. Kid at the front desk didn't know either."

"Well, I hope so."

"It isn't screaming anymore, so it's probably not there."

"That seems right."

Fall had taken hold of the forest and most of the trees were turning red and orange and brown. The cold rain had soaked the world and even the brightest reds and golds felt somber and chilled. It was still beautiful, though, Marshall thought, and very calming if one got past the sense of impending doom and the dangerous distance to the ground.

The path was old, wide, and well-worn. It forked once or twice, but Ros took her confidently deeper into the forest. It occurred to her, suddenly, that she might be afraid of him. She was likely bigger than him, but he had the advantage of knowing where they were going, as well as being younger and in much better shape. She could imagine, vividly, in fact, a young man

luring her to the woods, raping her, and then leaving her in the dark. Her paper had covered that kind of story.

She dismissed the idea. She was bigger than him, and besides, he was so gentle. It was just an instinct, part of being a woman in the world.

The house appeared through the trees like a tower in a fairy tale. Set on a rocky hill, it looked down at them, its stone walls still standing but its windows empty. A ragged curtain fluttered out of one of them, like a ghost waving at her lost love, finally come home. There was a long-faded air about it of security, of strength. It was a house built in times of plenty to hold a family forever. What it was now felt wrong, like a home turned into a mausoleum.

“What is this?” Marshall asked, and she could hear the awe in her voice.

They came up around the side, where there had once been terraced gardens, now overgrown and choked with ferns and vines. The great wood door was hanging off its hinges, and past the columned entryway, Marshall could see the rot and devastation of the house: black wood hanging from the ceiling, wallpaper sloughing off the walls, a greenish pond on the floor.

“It’s my family’s old house. Built during the Civil War, supposedly, but it got away from us.”

Got away from us, Marshall repeated to herself, *like it was a bird or a wild horse.*

A good house. Just a little lost.

“Someday I want to fix it up,” Ros said. “I don’t know. I just feel safe up here. It just feels right, you know?”

Marshall did not know.

She didn’t feel safe up here, on a horse, in the woods, on a stone hill before a crumbling house. There was nothing about the house that made her feel welcome or protected. It made her feel like there was a crazy wife hiding in the attic or a murderer in the basement.

She studied Ros, this waif, confident on his monstrous animal, feeling at home in a ruined house. Marshall had long congratulated herself for her ability to understand people, to empathize, but she admitted to herself that she could not fully understand Roswell Bently.

He was as strange a creature as the horses he loved. Maybe she was just getting old, and understanding teenagers was simply impossible once a wide enough gulf opened between you and your prom.

“You’re not going to ask me any questions at all?” Ros asked as the horses made their way carefully back down the rocky hill.

“Well, I have heard some pretty crazy stories about you. Some people suggest you helped a horse give birth to a human child. Some of them think you just helped Rosie give birth and then the foal died. I think it probably had more to do with your friend Emma.”

Ros glanced at her, his nose turning red.

“Do you want to tell me your version?”

“You know about Emma?”

“Yeah.”

He looked back at the house and his shoulders drooped. Beneath him, his horse seemed calm and unconcerned. She tested Ros, lowering her head to the ground to graze. Ros gave a gentle touch on the reins, a movement so small that Marshall would have missed it had she not been staring at him.

“She was my girlfriend. She got pregnant. I told her if she wanted to end it, that was okay, but the nearest place was Jacksonville, and she was sick all the time and I couldn’t get a weekend off to take her. I didn’t want to tell Mom. I knew she would be furious.”

Marshall let him be quiet, let the silence stretch out.

“It was my fault. I knew she didn’t like me. She didn’t like boys, but I knew that she would do it anyway, if I pushed.”

Marshall didn’t know how to respond to that. Or rather, she did. Her instinct had been right after all, in a way. *Oh, well.* Nearly every boy was some girl’s monster, she supposed—even this soft boy. Even this boy who had done her a great kindness. The way he admitted it, so casually, made her sad, as though he didn’t know there was any other way to be. Marshall was disappointed, but not terribly surprised.

“So, when she said she wanted to go, to leave it all, I said okay. However she needed me to, I would take the baby. She called me that night.”

“Where did she go?” Marshall asked.

“The city, last I heard.”

So, Marshall had her story. There was a baby and a girl and a boy and the girl was gone. The end. A bittersweet truth in ink and newsprint. She and Ros would both be free, and she could spend the rest of the week chasing a real story, a real murderer.

And yet.

The questions stuck like a splinter in her mind.

“Dr. Foster said when she came out Rosie had given birth,” Marshall said, and let the question hang, unasked, between them.

Ros shrugged. “She was wrong, I guess. It was just me and Phillip out there.”

“So why did you call her?”

“I thought Rosie was colicking. Just happened to also be the night Phillip came.”

She couldn’t call him on that. She had no idea what “colicking” was or what it meant when a horse did it. She was sure, absolutely certain, that Ros was lying to her, or that he wasn’t telling her something—a distinction without a difference. She also knew he wouldn’t tell her, not yet anyway.

“Thank you, Ros. Thank you for telling me.”

“If you’re going to write your story, leave Emma out of it,” Ros said, turning in his saddle. His eyes were wide, as if he’d just realized he’d made a mistake.

“I can do that.”

They put the horses away, and Marshall, though she felt oddly fatigued, insisted on helping Ros carry the tack and tools back to the tack room. The cat was still on her shoes, and she had to physically lift her off to retrieve them. She patted Charger on her way out, feeling a strange connection to him, a camaraderie, an alliance.

Thank you for not killing me even though you could.

“Can I ask a favor, ma’am?” Ros said very quietly.

“Sure. What do you need?”

“Would you give me a ride to school tomorrow? I’m supposed to take the bus while Mom’s at the fair, but there’s this guy that’s giving me a hard time and with the baby, you know, it’s hard. You don’t have to!”

Marshall felt surprised and then sad. This kid really didn’t have enough people looking out for him. He deserved more.

“No. No. That’s fine. It’s the least I could do after your hospitality. I’ll see you then.”

Ros gave her a lopsided grin and watched her truck until it disappeared down the road.

CHAPTER 17

MARSHALL

Marshall felt damp and heavy, which she often did after she cried. She also felt guilty, again, for crying in front of Ros. She had certain expectations for herself about appearance and resilience and some bullshit about not being a victim. Her childhood had not tolerated flights of feeling, and her professional world did not allow for fragility. She was, and always had been, a rock.

Except with Joseph, but that didn't count.

She saw the ridiculousness in that, and yet she still felt her stoicism was to the benefit of other people, to calm trembling interview subjects, to steady new, young reporters shaken by something they'd seen or heard, who were told it was a tough business and they had to be tough. She somehow simultaneously recoiled from the destruction of empathy and feeling and killed that same empathy inside herself. She felt it happening and also felt powerless to stop it. She remembered leaning over a drink, grumbling to Kelly about feeling numb to the horrors of the world, and Kelly agreeing with her.

Poor Kelly—sitting at her desk saying, after the funeral, *But are you really okay? Really?* Later, calling her the night she lost the baby and saying, *What can I do? What can I bring you?*

“Shit,” she said, because she'd turned onto what she'd thought was the main road but found another line of fences and a featureless white barn.

She had no idea where she was.

She looked down at the directions on her phone.

When she looked up, the dark body was already in the road, in her headlights, black and massive and moving. She yanked the wheel, turning toward the double yellow line, and felt the corner of her bumper collide

with the thing, hitting it with enough force to shatter, to maim, to kill, rocking the whole truck to the side. In the white panic of her mind, she saw the dead horse in the road, the blood, saw Thomas crying again. She looked in the mirror.

The road was empty. The trees on either side of it shook in the cold breeze, and she could see no sign that anything had been in the road at all.

She got out, and the cold of the evening hit her much harder than it had at Foxglove. The darkness augmented the weather, turning it into a weapon against her. Her heart was still hammering in her chest from the shock of the collision. She pulled her coat closer to her, desperately wanting a cigarette. This wasn't the time, she reminded herself.

Marshall kept the truck's lights on and wandered down the road, looking for the thing she hit. If it was hurt, she had to—do what? Kill it? Feel its legs for warmth?

Well, she had to do something.

From behind her, headlights flashed across the road. She stepped off the asphalt quickly, ducking behind her truck, but the car was slowing, pulling off. Again, the old fear, as in the forest, that she had been caught alone and vulnerable, and would now be raped and murdered. She should get back in the truck, she thought, but before she could, the man rolled down his window and leaned out.

"Everything all right here?"

"Oh, Jason," Marshall breathed. "Yes, I'm fine. I think I hit a horse, though."

"Oh, shit."

He pulled a flashlight out of the side of his door, stepped out, and started sweeping it over the ditch, the forest, and the road in a careful pattern.

Marshall followed him, squinting as hard as she could at the deep black between the trees. The rain came again, lazily. Finally, Jason shook his head.

"Well, whatever you hit must have been fine, or it wouldn't have gone far."

Marshall had the feeling he was being kind to her, lying to calm her.

“Let’s take a look at the damage.”

The truck was fine, or as fine as the slowly rusting ancient machine could be. The bumper was still intact. Marshall couldn’t remember if the dents had been there before or not, but none of them looked serious. There was no blood or hair smeared across the headlights.

“If you hit a horse, your truck would not be this okay,” Jason said. “Hell, if you hit *anything* that weighed 1,500 pounds going 25 miles per hour, you’d have a lot more damage than this. You were going the speed limit, weren’t you?”

She frowned at him and he laughed.

“You probably hit the shoulder. Big truck like this, the impact can really shake you. I’ve done it before. Let me buy you a coffee. I need one, and I have a favor to ask you. You can say no, but you look like you need a coffee.”

She nodded, hesitantly, let him pull out in front of her and followed, feeling relieved that they were going somewhere warm and bright.

Carter wasn’t behind the counter, but another woman was who could have been her twin. She even had the same exhausted grimace on her face. She was also very pregnant.

The coffee was good, though, and it gave Marshall something to hold so she could hide her shaking hands. When she closed her eyes, she still saw the dark body in the road, still felt the shock travel through her as they impacted, absolutely, certainly impacted, no matter what Jason said.

She had hit something.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said, which is what she’d said to Kelly too.

“Did you learn anything?” Jason asked.

“Nothing that’s helpful for you or Aaron. What’s wrong?”

“Aaron bolted.”

“Ah. Fuck.”

He ran his hands through his short hair and pulled in dismay.

“Any idea where he would go?” Marshall asked.

“Wherever he could get drugs, which probably means John Daily, which means I don’t know.”

“I have a theory,” Marshall said after a moment.

She reached in her pocket, pressed Luis’s piece of paper on the table, and slid it toward the exhausted man.

“Where did you get this?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Jason picked up the paper. He stood. He sat.

“I can’t just show up. He could take off again. It’s too important.”

“Why do you care so much?”

“He’s a good guy. He’s a good dad. He loves his son a lot. He was so smart in high school. We all thought he was gonna rocket out of here, but...”

“Sure,” Marshall agreed.

“It was my fault. He got hurt doing me a favor, and when he started to spiral, I ignored it. My great-granddad was a sheriff in town. The other ran runaway slaves. People look at me like some kind of healed wound. I wanted to stay away from all that, anything bad or messy, but that meant I wasn’t there when he needed me.”

“None of that sounds like your fault.”

He shook his head.

“Would you go talk to him?”

“Why me? I’m a stranger. The first thing this town did to me was tell me to get out.”

“I think that’s good, actually. Nothing this town has tried has helped Aaron, and now no one cares. Even his family is too exhausted, and the rest of the police are ready to string him up. But here you are, trying to help, even a little bit.”

“Yeah. I’ll do what I can. No promises.”

She was also eager to ask Aaron what happened that night, get her first quotes for a *real* story, but Jason didn’t need to know that.

“Thank you.”

Marshall did something very strange then, something she had maybe never done in her life—reached across the table and patted the younger man's hand. He smiled his warm smile.

“Any theories? To solve this?”

“Well, John Daily seemed to have motive, but I haven't really found means or opportunity yet,” Jason said.

A thought popped in her head, like a seedling pushing through the dark underbrush.

“Jason, does Daily have any reason to want to hurt you too? I'm just thinking, maybe he's trying to frame Aaron for a reason.”

He looked surprised, but she could see connections blink to life behind his eyes.

“I've gone after him a few times. I got a lot of shit for it, mostly from Pots and Avery, and I backed off, but yeah. We squared off.”

She tilted her head as if to say *well, there you go*.

“I'll be damned. Well, even more important we figure this out and get Aaron out of town. You find anything about your story?”

“I did. Ros says the baby was abandoned by Emma.”

“She was definitely pregnant. I mean, who am I to judge a girl by—but you could see it.”

“So why all these secrets? Why all the whispers and sideways glances?”

Jason tapped his fingers on the table again. He thought for a long time before he spoke.

“When I was a little kid, my parents passed me around a table leg when I got colicky. They also took me to the doctor, but you see what I mean. People grew up around here, only a few generations ago, completely cut off. They made their own stories, their own superstitions, their own medicine. You couldn't get a kid to the hospital. You had to believe the table would help. The city's gotten closer, but that sort of thing stays in you, and in your kids. There might never be a generation born in Raeford that's totally free of it.”

“And this is why no one wants to admit Emma was pregnant? Some kind of superstition?”

Jason sighed. “There’s a thing, like a bigfoot, I guess—that supposedly kills men and steals babies from the wombs of women, unlocks gates and sets the horses and cows free, digs up graves, gives kids hives—that sort of thing.”

“So, what? No one will talk about it because they’re embarrassed?”

“I think it’s more like they think they will...” Jason stopped. He was struggling, gesturing helplessly over his coffee cup and pointedly not making eye contact. “They think they might summon it—might get its attention.”

Marshall raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah, I know how that sounds, but I think there’s a ‘just in case’ element to it. It’s probably just a teenage girl running away, but if not, they’d rather be safe than sorry. You go to the doctor, but you also pass the baby around the table leg. People hedge their bets.”

He took a long drink of his coffee.

“And it makes an excellent excuse for anything bad that happens. ‘Well, Emma summoned the spirit. What can we do about it?’”

“Right,” Marshall agreed.

She remembered the smell of sage.

She thought that Dr. Foster didn’t seem like the kind of person who went for that sort of magical thinking, but she could be wrong.

“I’m not going to write all that,” Marshall said.

“I didn’t think so.”

Back at the car, Marshall did another pass, but there were still no scrapes, no dents, no sign at all that she had hit something. She still felt the impact in her bones, like a deep bruise.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket.

A little icon of a gray parrot had sent a message.

Still okay out there?

Yes, she wrote back. I have a lead.

CHAPTER 18

JASON

Jason woke beside a cat. The lump of gray fur purred softly and constantly, the metronome of his life, a tiny priest who forgave all his socks on the floor and whiskey-fueled rants and names taken in vain. He buried his face in the cat's side and the purring increased, like a thunderhead rolling into town. He had to get up, he knew. He had to get up, but there was always the possibility that he just didn't. What would happen, he wondered, if he just lay there, on his warm mattress? Of course, he would probably lose his job, but sometimes he daydreamed about how that would happen. Would it be immediate, a call from his supervisors with fury and yelling, or would it come later, when he appeared back at the office? Would someone come and check on him, or would they sense that he had simply abandoned them?

It didn't matter, because he always got up.

He fed Shadow and ate Cap'n Crunch over the sink while he checked his messages. Nothing from Marshall, but of course not. The woman had to sleep. Still, he was starving for information, for news.

Nothing still as he drove to the precinct, as he checked in, as he lingered around the coffee maker. He nearly jumped out of his skin when his phone dinged, but it was just Reeves, telling him there was a fistfight out front of his bar, and could he come and see if he could do anything before he called the police for real? Anyone besides Jason would throw folks in jail and ask questions later—not great for business.

Jason sighed, but he turned around and headed to the bar.

They were in the parking lot when he arrived, gesturing at each other in the way that men did when they were drunk and, while they didn't want to fight, it was important that everyone believed they would. A small crowd

stood around, mostly laughing, unconvinced the fight was actually going to happen. Jason rolled his eyes.

The moment his car came to a stop, the correct thing was said, the perfect trigger, and the two men lunged at each other. The observers fell on them instantly, pulling them apart as Jason arrived, standing between them, yelling *whoa* at the two furious men like they were agitated horses.

“Motherfucker!” one of them yelled—Thomas, a cut just above his eye. A lazy river of blood was working its way across his cheek.

Jason put his hand on the man’s shoulder and felt him tense under his touch. For a moment, Jason was sure he was going to turn and hit him. He didn’t, but he did pull his shoulder out of the younger man’s grip and look at him with contempt.

For the situation, Jason told himself. He was disgusted with the situation.

“The fuck is going on?” Jason said.

The other man, Chuck Meyer, looked better than Thomas, but would certainly have a bruise over his eye the next day. He had a guy hovering on either side, ready to pull him off again.

Another deputy arrived, the cruiser’s red and blue lights flashing, and Jason steered Thomas to his car, away from Chuck. He sat Thomas on the wheel well and got him a McDonald’s napkin to wipe his blood away.

“You want to tell me what happened?”

“Those fuckers,” Thomas mumbled.

Jason nodded at him. Sure, fuckers. He got it.

Thomas said, “I just thought I’d get a drink, you know? I thought, we did so well at the fair. The girls are cleaning up. We might have sold the yearling. Despite this shitty week, I deserved—”

“Congratulations.”

Thomas waved the praise away like smoke.

“So I thought I’d get a drink before I went home,” Thomas repeated.

Jason knew he was lying, that one got a drink on the way home not to celebrate, but to bury something—a fear or a sadness or a regret. He wasn’t sure which of them Thomas was lying to, but he was certainly lying.

“Anyway, I knew Chuck was talking shit around town. He’s still mad Adri won state champion two years in a row, you know.”

Jason nodded.

He knew. He also knew that Chuck’s mother OD’d in the front seat of a car with his toddler in the back. Who the hell cared who lost ten points because of a dropped lead or who pulled a shoe or looked at each other wrong as they passed in the aisle? Weren’t there better places to spend their time and energy?

Apparently not.

“What’s he saying?”

“That I killed Hershey myself, for insurance,” Thomas spat. “It’s fucking bullshit, and it’s disrespectful to my reputation.”

Jason nodded again.

“I worked hard for that reputation, and yeah, some of the stuff I do isn’t perfect. I’m not Agatha, you know. I can’t keep every horse no matter how lame or old it is. I can’t make money that way, but I fucking take care of my animals. I raise good animals. My business is good. It’s good. I don’t need to kick up cash by killing my goddamn animals.”

“No, of course not,” Jason said. “So, you called him on it?”

“Yeah, told him to go fuck himself and he starts pushing me.”

“Yeah, I see,” Jason said, trying for understanding, but his tone must have contained a trace of disdain or irritation.

“You know, that attitude is why everyone thinks you’re a son of a bitch,” Thomas said suddenly, inspecting the blood on his fingers.

“Is that the reason?”

Thomas looked down at the napkin in his hand, at the blood spread across it, soaking into the crumpled brown paper. Jason looked at it and suddenly felt like the man hadn’t been hit hard enough. He needed to be hit again. Jason was tired. His friend needed him. There were dead bodies in his town. He was sick, bone-deep sick, of people asking him for help and then looking down on him.

“You mean *attitude* like I don’t know my place? Like my nice, quiet grandpa who didn’t throw a fit that he couldn’t eat in your grandpa’s

place?”

“Don’t be all like that. Come on. My fucking head is killing me. I’m just bullshitting.”

“Sure. Sure. Hey, remember that day Aaron got hurt? The guys tell you what they were planning?”

“What the fuck? That was forever ago. What made you think about that?”

Marshall. Marshall made him think about that. Her attitude got under his skin and made his hackles rise.

“I’m just saying maybe you need to watch yourself a little more, huh? Not mouth off so much? Maybe you should be a little more careful about the enemies you make.”

Thomas’s eyes were wide and Jason realized he was really afraid, not necessarily of Jason, but of the system he represented—the bars and courts and fists and cement walls. This wasn’t what he wanted.

Jason took a deep, shuddering breath.

“Look, I didn’t mean it. This whole town has had nothing but bad luck for a hundred years and that’s not on you.”

“Yeah,” Thomas agreed.

“Maybe help me out a little bit if I let you off easy? Maybe put a good word in for Aaron downtown? You’ve got respect there and you know he didn’t do anything to your horses.”

Thomas looked Jason up and down, clearly weighing his next words carefully.

“Look, Officer, you and I both know it won’t matter. You know how this town does things. Nothing’s gonna save Aaron. Not me, not you.”

Jason considered actually hitting him then, but what was the point? He felt defeated. He felt a hundred years old, weighed down by his own skin.

“Fine. Got it. Chuck isn’t going to press charges,” Jason said, watching the man look sheepishly at them from across the parking lot. “He doesn’t want the trouble.”

“That’d be nice. How am I going to explain to the wife that I got in a fistfight at a bar at nine in the morning?”

“Tell her you fought the thing in the woods. And won. That’ll impress her.”

Thomas laughed, a fake laugh—just the noise required to finish the conversation, because Jason’s joke had given him permission to end it. Now he would go speak to Chuck and smooth that over, then get back in his car and go back to work and leave the chaos and cleanup behind him.

Jason thought, *I’m glad.*

I’m glad all these assholes think I’m a son of a bitch.

CHAPTER 19

MARSHALL

Marshall pulled into the Foxglove driveway and found Ros waiting for her, Phillip bundled and sitting in his carrier. Getting the car seat into the truck took forever, and she was pretty sure you weren't supposed to put a baby seat in the front. She had a master's, for the love of God. Why was it so hard to strap a plastic seat into a car? When they were finally ready, Phillip was crabby and threatening to cry, despite all the soothing noises Ros made.

She was, momentarily, glad she didn't have children. She and Joseph had talked about it, of course, but somehow the conversation always ended on *maybe* which really meant *no*. She imagined, for a moment, the two of them sitting in their messy apartment, dirty dishes in the sink, toys scattered across the floor, Joseph laughing in the middle of the floor as the baby babbled and kicked. The vision was immediately obscured by another: Marshall standing in front of a hospital bed, the machines beeping quietly, the baby sleeping in her arms, because even her nightmare wouldn't allow her to see Joseph in that bed and their baby crying at the same time. He was gray. She was alone.

She put a hand on her heart. It hadn't happened. It was okay. It hadn't happened and she felt relief. She was here because she didn't have that baby—that almost-baby, that shattered sliver of Joseph that might have burrowed into her heart like a clot.

And then she felt guilty.

Shouldn't she feel a different kind of grief? A better, purer kind?

"You have everything you need?" Marshall asked.

"Yeah," Ros said.

"You did your homework?"

“We don’t have homework. It’s a new thing. Kids were getting too stressed.”

For a moment, Marshall considered saying something about kids these days, about their weakness or softness, but she remembered Ros looking up longingly at his family’s ruined house, rotting away in the forest, the curtain fluttering out at them like the veil of some haunted bride, and bit her tongue.

The high school looked like it had been shiny and new in 1960. She knew, without asking, that Agatha and Carter had attended the same school, and that Phillip would likely attend it too. The sign, once painted a bright and cheerful orange, said *Whitehorse High School*, but the letters were curling into themselves, cracked and faded.

Ros told her to pull around the back, where a slightly newer sign read *Linda Grayson Childcare Center*.

“Do you need help?”

“Nah,” Ros said, in a tone that told her that, yes, he did.

She got out and took the baby’s bag from the back seat, feeling strangely like Ros’s mother or aunt as they walked up and opened the heavy steel door, smattered with stickers of smiling suns and rain clouds. A bell rang, the identical twin to the one over the door at the diner.

The room was small, segmented by low lines of cubbies with children’s names on them, written in crayon on three-by-five cards. Nothing matched, not the bassinets or the cots or the hooks for coats on the walls. Almost all of it was cracked or crooked. There were layers of crayon and old stickers on every surface. A group of teenage girls stood by the door with several older women, all of whom smiled at Ros and reached for Phillip, not to take him but just to touch him, to run a hand down his cheek or take his small fist in their palm. Ros did it, in turn, to the babies they were holding. They did this in almost-silence, cooing at the small creatures, touching them, smiling at them, bathing them in welcoming. There was something sacred about it, something calming and centering, and Marshall couldn’t look away. She felt something that was the opposite of the creature trapped in the wall—of the dark snake slithering through the streets.

“Are you actually going to classes today?” one of the girls teased.

“Roswell,” one of the older women said, scolding. “Don’t let me hear you’re skipping school.”

Roswell looked embarrassed, but smiled at them, handing Phillip to the scolding woman.

“I’m going. Right now,” he said, “I’m going.”

Marshall turned away from the scene, worried that she was intruding, that she did not belong in the soft, gentle ritual. She ran her eyes along the rest of the room. On the wall, surrounded by a few children’s drawings and some A-graded tests that obviously belonged to the parents, there was a plaque and a photo of a girl on a horse, old and slightly yellowed. She had on a long coat and a bowler hat, but her curls had come loose around her face. She had been caught midlaugh and one of her hands was blurred, as if she was raising it to wave or point at the person behind the camera. She looked like her glee might lift her and her horse up into the white and gold sky.

“That’s Linda,” said a bright voice beside her, a girl, even younger than the teenage girls milling around the place. An open-mouthed toddler was on her hip. “My grandma knew her.”

“They named the center after her, I see,” Marshall said. “Was she a rider?”

“Oh, yeah. First in the state to go to Nationals! It’s kind of a famous story around here,” she said, and Marshall got the sense she was very excited to finally have someone who hadn’t heard it already.

“I’m just visiting,” Marshall said. “Tell me about it.”

The girl’s nose wrinkled under her freckles.

“My grandma said she was beautiful, really beautiful, and then she’d say, ‘that’s what beautiful girls get,’ and laugh, but that doesn’t seem funny to me.”

The toddler gurgled and the girl turned and cooed—a word that was not a word—an understanding.

“Is she yours?”

“Huh? No. She’s my sister’s.” She pointed at a girl who looked like a slightly taller photocopy of her with a braid to the bottom of her back and a My Little Pony sweatshirt, having a serious conversation with one of the older women. “That’s my sister Anna. I’m Brittany, and this is Stella.”

“So she got pregnant?”

“My sister?”

“No. Sorry. Linda.”

“Yeah, and you know, there’s some options now, not many here, but there are. But back then there was nothing, and they made her marry the guy, and you know how good that went.”

Marshall nodded.

“Hit her a bunch, I guess. So, she either killed him or he disappeared or something. She killed him, if you ask me, like a lot of them do, or asked the thing in the forest to do it for her, so they sent her to a hospital or asylum or jail. The whole thing was such a mess, the town couldn’t get over it. The church got together to change some things. Not, you know, a lot, but they made this place, so that’s good.”

“The thing in the forest?”

“Yeah. It’s, like, a campfire story girls tell each other. You can punish boys who hurt you and get rid of babies you don’t want. Anna even took me to the place to scare the hell out of me when I was little. There are all these carvings and stuff, past the church. You know the old oak that’s half dead?”

Marshall nodded, though she didn’t know. She thought she might be able to find it, though. How many places like that could there be?

“Just walk past that, straight back,” the girl said. “It’s right there. It’s probably not as scary as I remember, but I didn’t sleep for like a week after. I kept having this dream about a monster pulling my stomach out.”

“I’ll be brave,” Marshall said, and the girl smiled. “So you do this magic and the baby just goes away?”

“No! It gives it to a horse!”

“I’m sorry?”

“I know it sounds crazy. And you’re not allowed to tell the boys, my sister made me swear three times and then three more when we got home

and cross my heart with a sewing needle.” The girl used her free hand to make a cross over her heart. “It’s that serious.”

Marshall nodded seriously, trying not to smile. The girl was talking a mile a minute, as if she needed to get all her words out before Marshall inevitably bored of her. Just like Ros. Just like the kid at the hotel. Young folks in this town wanted to be seen so badly, they’d settle for a grumpy stranger.

It would be cute, if the things they were telling her weren’t so creepy and sad.

“So you have to do the magic at the tree?”

“That’s what Anna said. She decided not to do it, though.”

“Why?”

“Well...” She glanced over her shoulder. “My sister said her friend Bobbi did it, made me promise not to tell, but I think everyone kind of knows, you know? So, she said Bobbi told her it was in the Wilson’s stable and to just leave it and it would go away, but my sister just had to *know*, you know, because she already knew she was pregnant and was thinking maybe she could do that too? So, she walks all the way over there, which takes, like, hours, and my mom was pissed. I was little but I remember that. She threw the Snoopy mug against the wall and later my brother said that was probably good because it was full of lead anyway.

“So she gets there and has to go in through a window, and she said she could totally hear a baby crying. ‘It was a baby, Brit,’ she said. ‘It was totally a baby.’ So she gets to the stall and looks in and there’s, like, this *thing* in there. She said it had horse hooves and a baby face and it was covered in blood and just screaming. She ran out ‘cause it was too late, you know, for the baby.”

Part of Marshall’s brain told her this was ridiculous, but the hair on the back of her neck was standing up. She resisted the urge to shiver.

“What happened to it?”

The girl looked at her like Marshall was being stupid on purpose.

“It turned into a foal. Then you don’t have to worry about it. If you get to it in time, you can dip its feet in ash and eggshells and keep it as a

person.”

“Why go through all that and then keep it?”

The girl looked truly and fully disappointed in her now.

“So you don’t have to give birth. Have you ever seen giving birth? I was right there when Anna did it, and she was screaming on the floor and there was blood and the nurse was so *mad* at her, just telling her she’d seen much worse, and this was nothing and to just get on the bed. I can’t imagine worse than *that*! I don’t wanna ever do that.”

“Brittany! Anna! You are absolutely late for first period! Get!”

A very red-faced woman in horrifying florals put herself in between the girl and Marshall and glared at them both with a vehemence that made Marshall take half a step back.

Brittany gave Marshall a shy smile and carried Stella to the play area. Anna knelt and kissed her daughter on the crown of her head, then slipped her hand in Brittany’s and walked out. She did not smile or look at Marshall.

“Do not believe a word that girl tells you,” the woman said. “These kids make the wildest things up, I swear to God.”

She crossed herself.

“Maybe she’ll be a writer someday,” Marshall suggested.

“Not all of us get to do anything we want, miss. You three! Roswell, you too! To class this minute! Ma’am, I’m going to have to ask you to leave so we can get breakfast started.”

Marshall felt some part of her—the asshole journalist, the territorial predator—square up to start a fight with this woman, or maybe finish one, but then she remembered that she was tired and grieving and her shoulders dropped.

Maybe the woman saw this, or maybe she took pity on Marshall for other reasons, because her face softened, and she let a tiny smile flit across her face.

“It’s hard to see these kids like this, I know. This town is hard. This country is hard. We try to give them what they need, instead of what they dream about.”

“Seems like one of those is more useful.”

She nodded. “People believe a lot of weird stuff in this town. Maybe it’s because I’m an outsider, but I’ve been here fifteen years and I still don’t get it. Don’t take it too seriously. We’re all just a little lost.”

Marshall thanked her, waved to Phillip and Stella, who were regarding her with pouty seriousness, and retreated to the truck. She tapped her fingers on the steering wheel, watching other teenagers arrive late, laughing, fighting playfully, like wolf puppies in letter jackets.

She made up her mind and pulled out of the parking lot, pointing her truck toward the church.

CHAPTER 20

ROSWELL

It was coming, Ros knew. The violence. He felt it like his mother felt storms coming in her joints, the pressure first, and then the pain. Horses were better than humans at weathering storms. He'd watched out his window as horses stood in pouring rain, oblivious to, or disinterested in, the shelter standing empty beside them. His mother told him horses could withstand cold and wind and wet, but only two of them at any one time. He'd seen that in practice. Often when it got cold, the horses would revel in it—full of a feral energy they rarely showed on a nice summer day. He would watch them, miserable in his patched jacket, as they frolicked and sprinted through the new snow.

He was not a horse, and he often felt exposed to the elements. He longed for the safety of a shelter—felt homesick for something he had never really had.

He was no good at weathering storms.

It came for him anyway, at lunch.

He'd watched Jake throughout the day, orbiting him like a moon. He'd flinched away from the older boy, taking a different hallway, bolting from classrooms at the first note of the bell, hiding in the bathroom—but now it was too late. His back was to the wall, and he could do nothing but watch Jake approach, hands in his puffy blue jacket. He had that jacket on because he planned to leave as soon as he did whatever he was planning to do.

“Hey, Jake,” Ros said, flinching already.

The other students at the table, no one Ros knew well, stopped chewing and looked up, their instincts finally kicking in, telling them to freeze and, perhaps, the predator wouldn't see them.

“Hey, dumb fuck,” Jake said. He’d stopped walking but hadn’t stopped moving.

He rocked, irritably, taking his hands in and out of his pockets, turning to check for the adults, who were wandering around the cafeteria, unaware of tension at the other end of the room. How could they not feel it, Ros often wondered. It was like they were different species with different senses. It was like they were standing in the storm wondering why it was wet.

“You okay, Jake?” Ros said.

“You really fucked everything up for me, you know?”

“I didn’t do anything.”

The boy to his left was trying to finish chewing, slowly, carefully, swallowing painfully, but it didn’t matter if he finished his lunch or not. Getting up to leave was out of the question. They were all trapped there, somehow, by the gravity of the moment.

“Yeah, your fucking girlfriend did,” Jake said, taking two steps closer.

“She’s not my girlfriend,” Ros said.

“She ain’t?” Jake said sarcastically. “Well, then there’s been some big mistake. I thought it was her fucking bastard shit kid you’re carrying around. Or did you pop it out of your own pussy?”

“Shut up, man,” said one of the boys at the table, and Ros felt an instant deep affection for him.

The boy wasn’t looking at him, though. He only wanted to leave, to escape the tense situation before it hurtled toward violence.

“You all know it’s his fucking fault, shit in this town going sideways. I know your folks are talking about it at home,” Jake said to the boy. He turned to Ros. “Shoulda done shit right so my boss wouldn’t have to clean up your mess. But you wouldn’t know anything about that, would you? You don’t even see how much he worries. You don’t even fucking care. Your slut fucked up and now we gotta figure out how to set it right. She’s a whore and she should have swallowed.”

Ros stood, suddenly and with his hands clenched at his sides. He wanted to hit him, and he wanted that punch to be so decisive it would undo

generations of wrong and hurt. That feeling was back again. Everything was rain and sleet and cold and wind.

Jake smiled at him.

“Bitch. She’s a bitch, and she fucked you over royally. You’re fucking useless, like Daily said. Just like your mom.”

And that was the thing that drove Ros forward. He didn’t hit him, but just fell forward, confused about the choreography of battle. He smashed into Jake’s ribs and heard the air violently leave his lungs.

The two of them fell backward into another table, crushing two students against it. The impacted students instantly became part of the fight, and swung at Jake and Ros. Their friends joined in, and their rivals. No one needed an explanation or a reason. They’d been waiting for violence the way deserts wait for rain.

Jake hit Ros hard in the stomach and he tried to scream, but he had no air left as he crumpled to the floor. No one would have heard him anyway. Everyone was screaming. Kids jumped on their chairs and a few of them ran closer, laughing. Some of them scrambled away, but no one left. Everyone stayed, bore witness, took mental notes so they could tell the story again. The adults in the room converged on the two boys, but before they arrived Jake climbed on top of Ros and punched him, hard, again and again, lifted his head off the floor and hit it back into the linoleum.

Ros put up his hands, but he had no idea how to protect himself.

The adults yanked them apart, shoving, yelling, screaming at the children who were also screaming. Jake and Ros deflated immediately. They’d done what they had to, relieving the tension that had built between them.

There was nothing else that could have happened. It was inevitable. It was inevitable also that it would come again. As the principal screamed at them, his face veined and red, fresh resentment already simmered, already churned up in the bays of their chests, hot and acidic and cloying.

Roswell was marched in front of a phone to call his mother.

“Mom,” he said, holding a wad of tissues to his bleeding nose. “I’m sorry. I got in a fight. Can you come get me? With Jake. No one else, just

Jake. I am sorry. I am.”

He paused, looking at the back of Jake’s head through the office window. He was still being lectured by the principal. His head was bowed and his face was empty. He looked beaten. Ros felt, suddenly and unexpectedly, a wave of sympathy for the other boy.

“I’m sorry, Mom. Yeah, I know. I know I’m grounded. No, not the bus. Um. A friend drove me.”

“Thanks, Mom,” he said, after she promised to come get him.

He winced as she pulled up. Her face was ugly, horribly ugly, twisted in absolute, disgusted fury. And, of course, he deserved that. Not only had he not managed to take care of himself and Phillip, as he’d promised, he’d failed just as she needed him to succeed the most. He knew the things she needed, and she didn’t need this. She needed to be with the girls and the horses at the fair. She needed to make money to keep their house. She needed him to be responsible.

He looked down and saw blood, his blood, down the front of his shirt and flinched as a new wave of guilt rolled over him.

Ros strapped Phillip in and took a long, deep breath before he got in the car.

She didn’t say anything. Not yet. If she chose to hit him, he knew it would come fast and sharp. It was best to be very still and avoid eye contact.

They drove in silence back to the farm. Agatha periodically mumbled something to herself and shook her head. In the back, Phillip fell asleep, soothed by the motion of the car. When they arrived home, Ros moved quickly to get out, in part to retrieve the baby before he awoke, but mostly to escape.

Agatha held up a finger and Ros froze, flinched, eased back into the seat, and crossed his hands on his lap.

“I’m angry,” Agatha said.

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“I’m angry, and I’m not just angry at you.”

“Okay.”

“I’m sorry that—” She broke off, lifted her fists, dropped them against the wheel uselessly. “I don’t know. I’m sorry that I didn’t do better for you.”

“You did great, Mom,” he said, and meant it. “You did really great.”

“Then I’m sorry this is happening. I’m sorry we’re stuck here. I should have—”

He didn’t know what to say. He, too, was sorry this was happening. He too was sorry they both had to handle this, the baby, the rumors, the horses, the town, her father, Jake, the oxycodone in people’s veins, the monster in the woods, the house rotting on the hill, the loose porch railing, the grocery store that sometimes ran out of toilet paper, the main road that flooded quarterly, the future flailing out in front of them, both boringly unchangeable and infuriatingly unpredictable.

“I love you,” Ros said.

“I love you too. Now—now get the hell out so I can go back to work.”

“Okay, Mom.”

“And I’ll come home tonight. I’ll just leave early tomorrow. I’ll come home tonight.”

“Okay, Mom.”

He felt surprisingly comforted as he made the baby’s bottle and the baby screamed in the Pack ‘n Play. He watched out the window as the sun set and welcomed the darkness to the farm. Soon he could no longer see the barn, the trees, the driveway. It was as if he and Phillip existed alone, a little double-wide boat with only the sea of darkness outside, and whatever swam within it.

CHAPTER 21

BRITTANY

Jake was waiting for her and Anna next to the flagpole, his hands in his pockets and a bandage on his eyebrow. He had his big poofy blue coat on, which made him look younger than he was, like a cartoon child.

“You’re not allowed on school property until next week, Jake Hanes!” A teacher yelled from the door behind her.

“I ain’t on school property!” Jake yelled back.

The teacher grumbled and glared as if to say, *You better not be*.

“Did you get in a fight again?” Anna asked, adjusting Stella on her hip.

The little girl reached for Jake, her hands grabbing air and her face full of a mostly toothless grin. Jake took her from Anna and pulled her into a cocooning hug, rubbing his face in her hair. Stella squealed.

“Not much of a fight,” Jake said, but he didn’t look Anna in the eye.

Jake buckled Stella in her Pooh Bear car seat, because he was the only one she’d let do it without swinging her tiny hands and feet in frantic defiance.

“She’s getting too big for this seat,” Jake said.

“Well, I can’t afford a new one and I’m not asking Mom,” Anna said.

“I’ll ask Mr. Daily. I’m up for a big job for him soon and I’ll use that.”

“Nothing bad, though, right?” Brittany said.

“Maybe,” Jake said, giving her a wink as he climbed into the driver’s seat of the creaking truck.

Jake didn’t have a driver’s license, but most of the kids who drove to and from school didn’t. The scale of the problem, or indifference, kept the police from doing much about it, unless they wanted to tack the charge on top of another one.

“So, who was it this time?” Anna asked.

“Ros,” Jake said.

“Oh, what the hell, Jake? Roswell Bently? Why not fight a toddler?”

“He’s fucking...” Jake slammed his hand on the wheel, as if overcome by his anger and unable to find the words. “He’s so fucking entitled. He just gets whatever he wants, and he doesn’t even thank Mr. Daily. He’s got that house and the stable and all these barns that hire him to ride, and that’s just because Daily set him and his mom up and ‘cause he has respect in this town, and him and his mom go around and talk shit about it. I fucking can’t stand it.”

“Don’t swear in front of Stella,” Brittany said, mostly to derail her brother before he really got going.

“Sorry, Stella.”

“Stupid reason to get kicked out of school again,” Anna said.

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

“Is Mr. Daily gonna be mad at you?” Brittany asked.

“Nah. I won’t tell him. He did tell me to keep my nose clean, though.”

“Better hope he doesn’t find out,” Anna said.

“He doesn’t *own* me. I just work for him. What we got for dinner?”

“Enough. I can make spaghetti.”

“Okay, yeah. We got some stuff for breakfast too.”

“Fuck. Mom’s home.”

They drove the last block in silence, all eyes on the little white sedan in the driveway with the Hello Kitty sticker in the window. Jake parked and they sat in the car, quietly except for the mumbling of Stella chewing on her fist, gathering themselves. Finally, Jake took a deep breath and opened the door. The girls followed, collecting their bags and Stella and walking slowly and quietly into the house.

Brittany was frustrated by how much noise her shoes made on the gravel. She’d read books about young women warriors who could move silently through the forest, but she couldn’t ever seem to do it right. The door creaked as they opened it and stuck fast on the mud-stained *Thankful* rug.

“Kids?” their mother yelled from the kitchen.

Anna turned and nodded at Jake. “Go. Go!”

“I gotta go to work, Ma!” Jake yelled, then smiled at Stella and disappeared back out the door.

Stella squeaked and started whining. It wasn’t quite a cry, but the only way she could show her frustration without words.

“Oh, great! Exactly what I wanted to come home to, a fucking crying baby. As if three of you aren’t enough.”

Their mother appeared in the doorway, her curly red hair streaked with gray and bleached blond. She was rubbing lotion on her many-ringed hands, because she loved wearing every piece of jewelry Brittany’s no-good father had ever given her, including a very bedazzled name tag that said *Angela* with a tiny halo over the A and little wings on each side.

“Sorry, Mom,” Brittany said.

“Agatha called and wants to pay you twenty bucks a pop to braid horses at the show. You want to?”

That might be enough for a car seat.

“Yeah!”

“Get changed. Abby’s mom will pick you up.”

Brittany ran as fast as she could into her room to find her torn jeans and muck boots before her mother could change her mind.

She came back, pulling her hair into a bun behind her head, to Stella crying in the playpen and her sister with her arms crossed, looking at the floor. Her mother had both hands tangled in her hair and was screaming at Anna.

“—just saying I want some peace when I get home, Annalee! I don’t think that’s too much to ask!”

“She’s a baby, Mom! I can’t just keep her in my room all night. Can’t you watch her for like an hour?”

“You wanted her! It’s your job to take care of her! I told you if you wanted to keep her she was going to be your responsibility!”

“I can’t believe you wanted me to get rid of her! She’s your *granddaughter!*”

“I gave you a choice I didn’t have. Hell, I would have taken you to the tree and done it for you rather than wake up at two a.m. for another four years while you try to keep her quiet. And what are you going to do when you graduate? Did you think about your future at *all*?”

Anna was crying and crumbling to the floor. Brittany felt embarrassed. Unlike her and Jake, Anna always melted down before their mother. She just didn’t understand why Anna couldn’t learn the script, to apologize and grovel and then go about your day. Angela just wanted to know that you felt bad and that you were grateful. She probably would have happily taken the baby for an hour or two if Anna had just said, *You’re right. I’m so sorry, Mom. I should have just done the magic*, but Anna always had to be dramatic.

“I hate you!” Anna screamed from the floor. “I hate you! I hate you!”

“Shut up!” Angela yelled back.

Brittany realized that the sobbing child was reaching for the unicorn on the floor. She handed it to her and tried to give the toddler a hug, but Stella was already pulling away, petting the little plastic face with painted stars in its eyes.

“Be good,” she whispered, and ducked out the door before anyone could stop her.

She didn’t have a plan for dinner, but maybe one of the other families would take pity on her and slip her a sandwich, or maybe Agatha would pay her early and the food trucks would still be open.

She squatted in the grass to wait for Abby’s mom and looked for four-leaf clovers. She could use some luck; they all could. Maybe it would have been better if Anna had gone to the tree. Maybe it would be easier if Stella wasn’t in their house.

Her stomach turned at the thought. Of course she wanted her little niece. Of course she was welcome. But Brittany was tired of being hungry and afraid.

If it happened to her, she would go to the tree, she promised herself.

There were no four-leaf clovers after all.

CHAPTER 22

MARSHALL

Marshall found the tree.

It was just visible from the road, huge and twisted, much older than the trees around it. She wondered why its ancient neighbors were felled or burned or had died, and this one was spared. The bark was flaking away from its limbs, and the white heart of the wood was bleached by the sunset, like bone through rotting skin.

She glanced behind her, at the church, a dark shadow against the forest, the graveyard, the red, setting sun. There was light in the church's windows, but it seemed weak, as if it could only struggle against the darkness.

She would get no help from there.

She sighed and plunged into the underbrush. The ground squelched beneath her feet and the ferns and bushes flicked water on her pants and socks. She had only gone a few steps before she was soaked, and her boots slipped on the rotting leaves.

She was disoriented for a moment and had to stop. She'd thought the tree was very close to the mowed strip that separated the road from the forest, but she'd been walking for a while now and the tree stayed ahead of her, an enormous weight that pulled her closer even as it sank farther and farther away.

She looked behind her again, but sure enough, the trees on the edge of the forest had already blocked her view of the little church. She was making progress, it just didn't look the way she expected.

She continued. It took a long time, and she was dripping wet when she finally made it.

She paused to touch the old tree, press her palm against the dark bark. She didn't know what she expected—heat or vibration or acknowledgment.

The tree continued towering above her, indifferent.

She stumbled into a clearing on the other side of the tree. The area had been stripped of undergrowth, and had the look of a campground in that it was obviously cared for by many people inconsistently. In the center of the dirt was a ring, dug about an inch deep, with cryptic marks drawn in the center and carved into the trees on the edge of the clearing, though the largest was clean of them.

There was something childish about it, down to the PBR cans half hidden under a pile of dead leaves. It almost made her laugh, how silly it was, and how expectant. There was a dark optimism in the woods, an attempt by whoever built and maintained it to change their lives by the force of their belief alone. There was a confidence in the secret power of whatever they were trying to build that Marshall found amusing. Then, as she thought about it a little longer, she found herself more sad than amused. This place was a cardboard sword held up against a very real dragon.

“Joseph,” she whispered. “You would not believe the crazy things I’m finding out here.”

If she was a desperate girl, would she come to this clearing, draw the figures she needed, and pray it worked? She tried to put herself in Anna’s shoes.

Instead, she thought of herself a few months before, sitting alone in a doctor’s office, one hand on her stomach, the woman tugging on her stethoscope anxiously. Marshall could still feel the ultrasound gel drying under her shirt.

“This is difficult,” the doctor said, which was when Marshall started crying.

Because it was difficult, and somehow saying it out loud gave Marshall permission to cry about that. She wiped her eyes and the doctor handed her a box of tissues.

“Take your time,” the doctor said.

It was kind. They were both busy women who understood the price of time.

“What are my choices?”

“You don’t have many. I’m afraid your decision is if you want to find a solution now or wait until your body passes it on its own, but there are risks.”

“Infection?”

“Infection is a concern if you wait, yes.”

Marshall sniffed loudly and crudely. She felt naked, more so than a few moments before, naked on the table.

“I know you just lost your husband, and it would be best if you could wait to make this decision, but I’m afraid you may not have that luxury.”

“Can you set up the appointment?”

“No. I’m afraid you’ll have to do that yourself.”

And she was relieved. She hated herself but she was relieved. Joseph had wanted a child, and here it was, just a few weeks after he died—and she felt required to carry it and care for it and keep it forever even if every one of her instincts screamed *no*. But here was an excuse. It was risking her life, and dying on its own, and the responsible thing to do was to give it up.

She felt relief, and then she felt crushing, soul-shaking guilt.

She had lost Joseph and then she had let him go.

She had made that choice.

Yes. She would have come to this place. She would have drawn the symbols in the dirt and on the ragged bark.

But what was this talk about a price?

She squatted at the edge of the circle and looked at a deep, dark stain in the dirt. It was probably just beer. The soggy corner of a booklet and the handle of a plastic bag poked out of the dirt at the very edge of the stain. Marshall hooked a finger through the handle and pulled.

The filthy bag contained the stained and soaked remnants of a few comic books and a receipt completely distorted by bleeding ink. The books had become a solid paste, but she could read the title of the top issue, *Superman: Son of Kal-El*.

She dropped it back into the puddle and squinted at the tree.

The leaves were familiar. Weren’t they just like the few scattered around Luis’s body? Wasn’t the wood like that stick? Was the dark stain on the

bark blood or from the rain? The tree was fairly close to the field where Luis was found. Her working theory had been John Daily, but could he carry a man that far?

She'd seen a lot in her career. She saw people pull things off that should have been physically impossible: Moms pulling minivans off their kids. Tiny old women murdering their abusive husbands with kitchen shears. Maybe Daily cared enough about Thomas to kill his sometime stablehand and endanger his horses. Maybe he hated Jason enough to frame his friend.

But the piece of wood, the stick in Luis's chest, that suggested something ritualistic. Unavoidably it brought vampires to mind, or sacrifices on volcanos. Sure, this could be a grudge, but with all this talk of a price, was it something stranger? Was there magic in the town that could do things like, say, make a horse give birth to a human baby?

She shook herself. The spooky tree was starting to get to her. She just needed to get back to some fluorescent lights and everything would make sense again.

Whatever the case, Jake was certainly physically capable of this murder, and maybe he wasn't Daily's only resource.

She took her phone out and snapped a few photos, then tromped back to the car and drove to the address on Luis's note.

On the way she kept thinking of the tree, and trying to capture that amused feeling—the little chuckle in the back of her throat—but she couldn't. It was gone. It had transformed, somehow, into a shiver up her spine.

Ros said Emma gave birth. The vet said a horse gave birth.

There was a horse that gave birth. There was a baby.

There was a clearing. There was a circle. There was a tree.

CHAPTER 23

EMMA

Emma's phone rang, loud and sharp, and she flinched away from it. She was sitting on the little fire escape, which she wasn't supposed to sit on, but did, because it felt poetic and she wanted to be like a poem. She looked back up at the city, the dirty, loud, beautiful city, rolling her shoulders back, fighting against the little knot of pain that lived there, that lived in her elbows and ankles and knees too, that she assumed everyone had, and that only bothered her. She'd never mentioned it to anyone. They wouldn't have had money for the doctor anyway.

She picked at the remains of her pink, glittery nail polish. Finally, she took a deep breath and answered the phone.

"Yeah?"

"Emma, it's Mr. Daily."

"Yeah, I know."

She felt the sudden need to put another layer on, to shut the window, to hide her conversation, but of course no one knew who Mr. Daily was here. No one would suspect her of anything except having a conversation. No one would hear the name and automatically think worse of her or even know to be afraid.

"I just wanted to check in, make sure you're settled and have everything you need," Daily said.

"I'm fine, Mr. Daily," she said, and tried to say it forcefully. She tried to say it in a way that communicated *go away*, but she knew that she owed him. He'd been very generous to her, despite what she'd done.

"Good. Good. I'm glad. You'll be happy to know that Phillip and Roswell are both fine, doing very well in fact."

"Cool."

“Now, I need to know how you did it, Emma. I need you to tell me immediately. I’m getting tired of being nice about it.”

“I don’t know,” she said, feeling heat grow up her neck. “It wasn’t supposed to go like it did. I don’t remember who told me what to do.”

Part of her thought she was born knowing how to do the ritual, that it was another hand-me-down, something in the water or her own DNA. But she also remembered hearing about it, from other girls whispering at sleepovers, or her aunt, drunk on wine at Thanksgiving, or Ms. Charlotte ranting after church when Horace left her. It was always there, a secret shared among women—a horrible, bloody emergency exit. Patricia Hawkins had shown her how to draw the shapes in the dirt at recess. Becca Sanderson’s sister had told her the words. It was an open secret, but it seemed wrong to tell Daily.

“I don’t know,” she repeated.

“I don’t think you’re taking this serious enough,” Daily said. “Why don’t I come up there and we can talk face to face?”

Panic climbed up Emma’s spine like a spider and she shook, physically. A wave of fury followed it, and then panic again, the tide of her emotions crashing against the rocks of her. She looked around the apartment, at the ratty couch, the bare mattress, the pizza boxes in the corner. There was nothing there to rescue her.

“I have to work.”

“All day? It won’t take long. It really would be a little thing to do for the person paying your rent, you know.”

“Okay.”

She knew she had been defeated before she’d even picked up the phone.

“Attagirl. I’ll be there tomorrow afternoon. I’ll bring some money too.”

She bit her lip. She needed that, and needing kept her connected to him. He needed her too and that kept her safe, and Phillip and Ros too. He would never hurt Phillip and Ros, would he?

“It’s fine, though, right?” she asked.

“Absolutely. Everything’s fine.”

CHAPTER 24

MARSHALL

Marshall walked up to the door and knocked. There was a long pause, and she was preparing to knock again when the door opened and Aaron blinked at her from the dark living room. Marshall thought he looked much better not lying in a ditch, cleaner and clothed. He looked just as distant, though, just as damaged. The bags under his eyes looked like bruises now.

“Yeah, what?” Aaron said.

“Good morning. Jason sent me to check on you.”

“Yeah?” Aaron said, picking at the back of his head and growing red. “What for?”

“I’m pretty sure you know why. You want a smoke?”

She stepped aside, because she knew he wanted a smoke.

He followed her outside and sat on one of the white monobloc chairs. She handed him a cigarette and her half-melted lighter. Their smoke rose toward the porch ceiling and gathered around the pretty crystal light. Sometimes Marshall could convince herself that this lovely thing, this pretty little line of gray, wasn’t so deadly. So many pretty things could be deadly, she thought, and then admonished herself for being cliché.

The place made the hair on the back of her neck stand up. It was one of those things that was hard to explain to someone who wasn’t in the know. Every instinct she’d built as a woman and a reporter was yelling at her that she was relaxing outside a lion’s den. Maybe it was because the place was so staged, with landscaping and a carefully cut lawn, and yet had nothing that needed actual attention, like potted plants or festive decorations. The flotsam and jetsam of a messy, real life was missing. No bikes in the front yard. No forgotten coffee mug on the railing. It was just a place that kept people for a little while, and then spat them back into the world, worse.

“So, why didn’t Jason just come himself?”

“He thought you’d bolt if you saw him.”

“Yeah, he’s probably right.”

“So, what do you want me to tell him?”

“Tell him I’m fine and leave me alone. Anyway, what are you doing here? Aren’t you working for a newspaper?”

“Yeah, but I had a free afternoon. Also, I wanted to ask you what happened that night. Did you kill Luis?”

“Just walk up and ask, huh?”

“Worth a shot.”

“Well, bad news for you. It was a bad trip. Everything about that night is a mess.”

“How about before that?”

“I remember partying here. There were a bunch of us. Daily was in a good mood, and someone else was paying, so I was like, *fuck it*, and I did too much. Luis was there. We talked for a while. He was mad because Daily said he had work for him, so he stayed, but the work wasn’t happening and he needed money to send home. He’s got folks that depend on him. I was like, *yeah, sorry man, but you know Daily. He does whatever the hell he wants and we just have to live with it.* Then he suggested we talk to Daily together, ‘cause I’m better in English, and I was like, *sure*, because I was high and stupid, and Daily said he actually had a job for us right then and did we want to fuck with Thomas? I said sure, because Thomas is a prick. He wanted me to go let a bunch of his horses out and drive them into the woods, let the monster eat them. I thought that was a joke. I thought it was all just fun. Just funny. I remember driving somewhere. I remember standing in a field and looking up at the sky. I remember being really hot and taking off my clothes and feeling like...”

“Go ahead.”

“Feeling like I could feel the stars on my skin. It was a good feeling, and then just a lot of fear and being sick. I’m sorry. I wish I could remember. I don’t think I killed him, though. I never got violent on the stuff.”

Marshall looked him up and down, but she believed him. She was often, though not always, right about people, and here she saw a damaged teenage boy who froze himself in amber at the moment of his greatest defeat and lived there now. She didn't get the sense that he was lying.

"Where was Luis when you let the horses out?"

"Luis went off with a few other guys. I don't know their names. Haven't seen them again. Maybe I imagined them. I thought they were going to open up the other gate. I don't know how he got there."

"And when you got back here, did Daily tell you anything about that night? Did you ask him about Luis?"

"Daily said he had no idea what could have happened and kept saying Luis and I were always fighting, but I know that's not true. I liked Luis. Wish I'd known him better. You know what I think? I think Daily killed him and sent me there to take the fall."

"Why?"

"Fuck if I know. Maybe Luis knew something or maybe he owed something? I just don't think I killed him. I really don't."

"Jason believes that, but the police are pretty sure you did it. Jason wants to get you out of town and in rehab to keep you safe."

He smiled a small, tired smile.

"Jason's been in love with me since high school, and fuck, maybe I'm in love with him, too. I don't know. He's the only one who keeps trying, and maybe I like that. Maybe I'm fucked up enough to want it. But I guess I'll let him down again."

They sat in silence for a while longer. Marshall had a nagging feeling she was supposed to do something—she wasn't sure what, but something more for Aaron. She felt a pressing need to talk him out of his current course of action, to lure him away from his mistakes, to bring him over to a better, brighter place. She knew from experience, from long and painful experience, that trying rarely did any good unless the other person was trying, too. Is that what her editor had been trying to teach her with this stupid trip? That she needed to try to come back to them? Christ, what an asshole. A double asshole because it might have worked.

Aaron didn't need her opinion, she thought. She was just a stranger. She would be gone in a few days and his life would continue apace. She was not so arrogant as to believe her input would be transformative.

Do it anyway, Joseph said.

He might forget it. He might not. If he was ready enough, he might grab for it, like a life preserver.

"You're being really honest for someone suspected of murder."

"Why not? It's not like my truth is going to matter, really. I feel like I'm coming to my end, I guess, and you and Jason are the only ones who asked. It's nice to be asked."

"I believe you. I do. I don't think you killed him."

"So what's your theory?"

"I think Daily was trying to hurt Thomas and Jason, by getting at Thomas's horses and Luis and you all at once."

"Maybe we were just expendable," Aaron sighed.

"This doesn't have to be the end. You can do this thing. You really can. Doing it every day is possible."

"So I've been told."

Marshall took a deep breath and could almost smell Joseph's sage.

"Listen, I lost my husband a few months ago, and then our baby, or fetus or whatever."

It was said awkwardly. She was embarrassed.

But Aaron had frozen and was looking hard at her now, as if his mind had finally dripped back into his body.

"I'm sorry," Aaron said. "I've got a kid. Best part of my life."

"I didn't even tell him, my husband. I wish I had. I think it would have made him happy. It just seemed like it would complicate everything. I couldn't find the words. I'm a writer, and I couldn't find the words. Kills me now, because there was nothing I could do, and now there's still nothing I can do."

"Why are you telling me this?"

Why was she? Maybe because she knew exactly what Aaron meant by *I feel like I'm coming to my end*. That's the way she'd felt since she'd

watched her husband breathe his last, but now she was starting to feel differently—like maybe she was coming to a beginning, and the more she talked to people, and was honest with them, the stronger that feeling grew, and she liked that. She wasn't sure how to explain that to Aaron, though.

"You got time. You got time and things to say to people."

Aaron ran a hand along his face, wincing at the stubble.

"Yeah, maybe you're right. Look, Daily's going to be back soon and he's not going to be happy about you, but...but maybe I'll grab my things and call Jason."

"Do you want me to tell him something? He'd come get you in a moment. Doesn't matter where he is. You should take him up on it."

"I need a minute, but tell him I've decided and give him the address," Aaron said, and then looked down at the cement walkway before flicking his cigarette butt away. "Yeah. Thanks."



The teenage boy at the desk waved Marshall over as she entered the hotel, looking mischievous. Marshall knew that look well. He had gossip.

"Hey, so, I don't know if you heard, but Ros got suspended today."

Marshall felt her heart sink. She kicked herself for not having seen this coming. Of course there had been good reason a boy like Ros, who did everything to please, didn't want to go to school.

"What happened?"

"I heard he punched another kid."

An oversimplification, Marshall thought, almost certainly. She would have to get the whole story from Ros.

"Everybody okay?"

"Yeah, they just sent him home. They're used to it. Weird if a whole day goes by without a fight. I think everyone freaked out 'cause no one expected it to be Ros."

"Is that a sledgehammer?" she asked, pointing to the thing leaning against the flowered wallpaper.

“Yeah,” the boy said, shrugging, giving her a nervous smile. “Just in case, you know.”

Upstairs, she called Jason before she even took off her coat, and he picked up on the first ring. She relayed the short conversation with Aaron, told him the man looked fine, or rather, still alive and suffering, which was to be expected. Jason sounded professional on the other end, but she heard the hope in his voice.

Poor guy, she thought. He still thinks this can all work out.

She felt like she should tell him about the grove, but it felt strange, like a secret. She felt like she was one of the girls whispered the truth about a crush at a sleepover, and she felt guilty for even considering breaking that trust. She glanced down at the room phone and realized a light was flashing. She had a message.

“I hope he follows through for you. Any update on your case?”

“My case?”

“Your body in a field.”

“Oh! Yeah, it’s not really my case. Sheriff thinks he died somewhere else and was dumped. They’re looking for that other location.”

“I might have found it,” Marshall said.

“Oh, did you?”

“Well.” She paused. She’d promised not to tell a boy about this, and Jason was certainly a boy. She shook herself. It was just a silly bit of folklore—it wasn’t like she was breaking a promise to a source.

“There’s this grove, by the church. Big tree, magic circle—kind of place where kids go to drink and hold séances. I see you making a face, but I swear it’s true. Luis was stabbed with some kind of stick, and the leaves on the big tree looked the same to me. Also, I found some comic books there and I happen to know Luis was a fan. Now, I’m not sure, but I did see something that might have been a blood stain. Or Pepsi. I’d need a more expert eye to confirm.”

“Huh. So you’re actually a pretty good journalist, huh?”

“Some people say that, yes.”

“All right, then! A solid lead. Tomorrow morning?”

“Yeah, all right,” she said. “First thing?”

“Deal.”

The message was from Roswell, and she couldn’t have been more surprised if it had been from Santa Claus. It just asked her to call back, so she did.

“Hey, I’m glad you called back before I left,” Roswell said. “What are you doing?”

His energy surprised her, threw her off the lecture she was preparing in her head, regarding one’s future and suspensions and punching other people’s faces being a bad strategy for long-term success.

“I heard you got suspended today.”

“Yeah, yeah. Do you want to see a horse be born?”

“I—I’m sorry?”

“Thomas just called. His mare is giving birth and I wondered if you wanted to see.”

“Why?”

“Not a lot of people get to see. I didn’t know how to thank you, you know, for driving me today. I thought you might want to see.”

She could hear anxiety in his voice. He had been so sure he was giving her a gift and she was disappointing him.

“Sure. All right, I’ll come pick you up.”

CHAPTER 25

ROSWELL

The living room was warm and bright, but Ros wanted to check the barn one more time before Marshall arrived to pick him up. The road from the house to the barn was already dark, flanked on either side by pastures. He knew the way, though, had walked it every day since he was old enough to toddle. This path was born in him, somehow, like the color of his eyes and the texture of his skin.

He turned on the aisle lights and checked the stalls. He paused to watch a mouse skitter from the grain room, disappearing into one of the dozens of holes chewed between walls. He always felt bad when they ran. He wished he had a way to communicate to them that he and his mother had given up hunting them a long time ago. They were outnumbered, and if they had to buy a few more cups of grain each month to keep the peace, that was probably fine. Their fear, quick and sharp and feral, always made him feel bad, as if he wielded a dark power he did not want.

The horses were anxious, and Ros wondered if it was a full moon. He'd never admit it to anyone else, but he'd seen firsthand that horses seemed to react to the moon. Even the most even-tempered animal would bolt or buck or pull more on the day of a full moon, and his mom wouldn't let him ride at night. *Just in case*, she said. *It doesn't hurt to be careful.*

"Are you all just excited because there's a new horse in the world?" he whispered.

It wasn't a full moon. If it was a full moon, he would have had enough light to see the pastures as he walked up the road.

Charger was pacing, a rapid back-and-forth motion that was, if it was chronic, called weaving. Charger wasn't a weaver, though, and he ignored Ros as he whispered softly to him. Ros opened the door, sliding the heavy

iron latch open and stepping inside. Charger didn't stop, and for the first time in a long time, Ros was struck by how huge he was, how powerful, how much damage the horse could do to him. He was so used to living with these animals as if they belonged equally to each other's lives, and as Charger's shoulder struck him and bounced his body against the stall door, he admonished himself for forgetting.

He closed the door and left Charger snorting at the window to his stall. The new gelding was the most upset, stomping circles in the sawdust, making small nickering noises, his coat shining with sweat from stress.

Horses were strong but fragile, and stress could dismantle them, screw up their insides, kill them with astonishing quickness. Their ligaments would literally begin to fall apart. Their bones would disconnect.

Ros was starting to panic. He'd never seen this—the whole barn collectively freaking out. And he wasn't sure what to do for them. He checked the tack room and the grain room, wondering if coyotes or even wolves had found their way in. He didn't think coyotes would be big enough to worry the horses, and wolves were extremely rare, but it was the only thing he could think of that would stress the entire barn at once. He found nothing, and the two black cats in the tack room regarded him with their usual impatience and disdain.

He'd have to ask his mother. She would know. Generations of horsewomen before her had stuffed their knowledge and experience into her mind since she was old enough to walk. She was slowly disseminating it to him, but—surely she would know.

"I'll be back," he promised the horses. "It's okay. I'll be right back."

The night felt strange, as if he was stepping down into it instead of walking through a door. The air was thicker and colder, and deeper in a way that was difficult to define. In the distance, the little home shone like a lighthouse, and he hurried in that direction, struck by how quiet it was. He could only hear the crunch of his feet on the gravel and the wind in the trees.

Then it was there, in the road before him. It had neither moved nor changed. It simply was, had always been there, waiting for him, and he had

never noticed, had walked past it all his life. He smelled blood and rot, like pennies in water and trash left too long in the dumpster. All at once, the wind sounded like shrieking birds and a thousand footsteps, galloping horses and a low, painful moan and wings and wings and wings and wings beating against the cold, cold air. He could not hear. He could not breathe. He could not move as the roar pressed in around him as if it was a physical thing.

The thing's head, long and thin, was turned toward him, and Roswell could see the light of the double-wide glint on its deep, deep black eye. It towered. It loomed. It was so much larger than any creature he knew or touched or saw walk around in the broad daylight. Ros couldn't see its edges. It bled into the blackness around it. Black, black, black, and something like a skull for a face, a mouth split too far, almost up to its ears, the teeth poking out at odd angles, dripping something into the leaf litter. Too many antlers. Too many legs? It was never still or consistent, but twitching and flickering like a dozen terrified foals.

Its pieces creaked against each other as it turned toward him. It was wicker and windchimes and carrion.

It stank like meat and rotten leaves and, intensely, of cold rainwater.

The thing took a step toward him, and Roswell almost choked on the smell of it, but there was sweetness, too, a cloying wave of honeysuckle. The thing took a shuddering step forward, gravel crunching beneath its hoof. Then it stopped and turned its jagged head toward him. Ros couldn't hear anything, couldn't even breathe.

The thing turned away from him and stepped off the road. Roswell lost sight of it in the dark and didn't wait to see what it was doing, where it was going. He ran, his heart pounding in his ears, his feet slipping on the wet gravel. He launched himself into the house, where Phillip was screaming in his mother's arms.

"Jesus, Roswell!" Agatha yelled, and then, seeing him, his face tight and wet with tears, feeling the weight of the night he brought in through the door, put a free arm around his shoulders as he choked out a few useless

syllables. She crushed him against her, and he buried his face in her shoulder.

He wanted to crawl inside her embrace like a caterpillar in a cocoon. He wanted her to crush his body until he became something new and flew away.

CHAPTER 26

DAILY

He was walking down the hall of one of his houses, a nicer one—a blue ranch three-bedroom about halfway down Martingale Lane. It smelled a little sweet inside, a little like weed and smoke, but nothing terrible. He kept it clean. He kept it orderly. Certain clients liked to meet him there, where they could tell themselves what they were doing was business or careful experimentation or adventure with guardrails and airbags.

He passed a bedroom in which two teenage girls did whippits on the bed, holding red and pink balloons to their mouths and inflating them again and again, rocking on the bed until the air in their lungs was all joy and laughter. They collapsed backward, giggling and twisting. He peeked into the room where Aaron was lying on the bed, groaning softly. On the side table a needle sat on a small plate painted with a Scottish terrier wearing a red scarf. Aaron's eyes were half open, and he moaned again, drooling onto the pillow.

Daily had been glad to hear the fear in Emma's voice when he called. Fear would keep her sharp and remind her that she needed his help. Fear kept people safe, and he could be that safety, or a plastic party-hat version of it.

She still wouldn't tell him what he wanted to know, though. Even after everything, she held out. They all did—every woman he had asked and bribed and threatened. Nothing had ever been kept from him so completely. It seemed like the more he dug away at the secret at the center of the town, the more it fought him, eluded him, hated him.

Hated him? Seemed unlikely, but it felt right.

He went to the kitchen, in which there was no food. No one lived in this house, they just shot up here, or smoked, or drank. They exchanged money

and sometimes sex. They slept here and pissed and shit, but no one lived here. There was still bourbon under the sink, though, and he found a mostly clean glass and poured a finger. Then he went to the back patio, little more than some flat stones laid in the grass and a railing. There, swirling the caramel-colored liquid in his dirty glass, he considered the forest on the other side of the chain-link fence.

It got dark so early now, and the chill of winter was setting in. It would be a hard, deep winter. He could tell already. He could feel it in his joints, and where he'd broken his arm falling off a train in his twenties, and in the bone he broke in his foot working the factory floor. He was getting old now, and pain was his season.

He wished it hadn't been so messy. The plan had been clean enough: Send Aaron to let the horses out with a pocket full of something that would make him pass out. Kill the immigrant. Hammer the stick through his heart. He still wasn't sure why that was a necessary part of it, but it worked on vampires, so why not. Drop the body by the patsy. The loose horses would make enough commotion to ensure that the bodies were found. Easy peasy. The horse's death had been unfortunate, but fuck Thomas anyway.

And then the ancient evil living between the trees would be sated.

But it hadn't worked.

In the trees beyond the fence he could see it moving, stalking back and forth, unfulfilled. The trees bent and bowed with its passing. It had followed him since he was young, and he'd long ago learned that no one else saw it like he saw it. Sometimes, when someone was truly white-eyed high out of their minds, they agreed with him, but who knows what they were really seeing?

He was certain of it while he was looking at it, but part of its awful fucking power was that it moved out of your brain like water from a broken bucket. You couldn't hold the damn thing. He had to work hard to keep it from slipping from his brain, and he had been working on that for decades. Once he'd realized what it was doing, and what it could do, he knew it was a matter of survival. He pitted his will against it.

He also understood it, could feel the pulse of its hunger. Maybe they were the same kind of creature. That's how he knew it wanted him now. Blamed him.

Hadn't the man been enough? Hadn't the horse been enough? Wasn't it as good as the boy? Maybe he needed more. There were several more useless people around town, homeless or without family, that no one would really miss. He could send people after them. Maybe the thing needed quantity for quality. Perhaps he was cutting too many corners. He needed Emma to tell him every detail of the ritual, so he was sure to get it absolutely right. Maybe that was the only way.

He thought he could see the outline of the thing's body, massive and black, and the sparking of its dark eye, watching him, waiting for him to wander out into the darkness or the fog.

Not likely, shithead.

The moment he turned from the monster, his mind supplied an explanation.

A tree branch in the wind.

Shadows on a brush pile.

A trick of the light.

Daily pushed back on these thoughts until he felt his skull ache. He had no mercy for that soft, inviting ignorance. It was fine for everyone else, but not for him.

He had to think. He had to plan what to do next.

He'd paid the muscle for the immigrant's death and the man was gone, disappearing back to lobster or crab or something in the north. Unreachable for months. His last crop of strong, reliable boys had fucked off to construction jobs or college. He'd have to rely on Jake for whatever he did next.

Headlights flashed across the front window. Jason was driving all over town, looking for his little buddy. The thought made Daily grin a little, if bitterly. Let him howl at the moon all night, pace in his cage. He couldn't get in. Not him and not the monster in the woods. Neither of them could get him yet.

CHAPTER 27

MARSHALL

Roswell seemed anxious and pale as he got in the truck, but he was never a very grounded kid, so Marshall figured it was best to let it go after he swore he was fine.

Thomas's farm was beautiful, clean, and freshly painted, a completely different world from Foxglove. The driveway ran straight past perfect black fences up to a white barn with a green, metal roof. There was a garden out front full of marigolds, pastures where the grass still grew green, and three sand rings with stands for an audience. There was even an office, standing separately from the barn with a rusted air conditioner in the window. Up the hill stood a proud, white house surrounded by rosebushes. There was a sign outside the office, a banner that read *Home of Pine Gold Bars*. Beside that was a picture of a horse, golden-brown in color, like toast. Roswell caught her squinting at the sign.

"He's a stud," Ros said. "Grandson of WR Pine Crossed Bars."

He paused as if she should be impressed, then seemed to remember who he was talking to.

"His stud fee is like \$10,000," he said, and this was something Marshall could better understand.

A young woman waved them into the main barn, introducing herself to Marshall as Lola. Roswell started asking questions immediately, and Lola, in slow, heavily accented English, answered. The barn was bright, well-lit, and Marshall thought she even detected heat. She put her hand up, and sure enough, the large boxes hanging from the ceiling were heaters.

The horses, who watched them walk down the aisle, were very different from the fluffy, good-natured ponies of Foxglove. Marshall couldn't imagine Charger standing in one of the stalls, his own little golden plaque

on the door. Each horse had a nonsense name like Playboy Night Whiskey or Pine Bars Dun or NTR Red N White. There was an empty stall on the corner that said *Lil Moon Blue "Hershey."*

Marshall looked away, as if the ghost of the dead horse might catch her eye through the bars.

Thomas was standing in the open door of an extra-long stall with another young woman, talking in a low voice.

"Roswell!" the new woman exclaimed. "You did make it!"

Lola smiled and stepped away deferentially. Marshall smiled back at her and wondered if she had known Luis. Maybe that was racist.

"I'm here! This is Marshall."

"We met," Thomas said. "This is Stacy, and this is Star, and hopefully, in a few minutes, either Moon or Sun. I called Ros because he's worked with Star. They have a bond. He's got some talent as a rider."

Stacy smiled and offered her hand to Marshall. She was a cute girl, with freckles, curly red hair, and an upturned nose, but her handshake was strong and confident. Marshall felt calluses below each of her fingers and thumb.

"Ros is a good teacher too," Marshall said. "He gave me my first riding lesson. Absolutely terrifying."

Thomas snorted. "Well, that's the first step. Careful, it gets addictive real quick. Next thing you know, you're shopping for your first horse and then you have six and then you open your own barn."

Marshall looked down at Roswell, but the boy just blushed and said nothing.

She peeked into the stall. There was a white horse, very round, pacing slightly, clearly uncomfortable. Her nose was flaring, and Marshall could hear her blowing hot air as she moved. Her tail swished, though there wasn't a fly in sight. Dr. Foster was at her side, patting her flank and mumbling encouragement.

"You called the vet already?" Roswell said, teasing a little.

"Well, it's an expensive horse, Roswell," Thomas said, smiling down at him with genuine warmth.

He had a dark purple and green bruise over his eye. Marshall almost asked Thomas about it, but she was worried it might ruin the gentle excitement of the moment. Marshall looked at Ros and realized the red spot on his face would probably be that same color soon.

Lot of violence lives here. Or maybe I just came at a special time.

It took hours, much longer than Marshall thought, and she found herself sitting in folding chairs with Thomas and Stacy, listening to the full lineages of local horses, and the time Thomas broke a leg falling off a pony in a creek, and when Agatha swept the 4-H circuit one summer completely from behind. She went the entirety of the discussion without understanding what a *lead* was or a *frog* or a *forelock* or why any of them were important, and yet loving the joy the group had and wanted to share. They, like most people who were passionate about a niche subject, were thrilled just to be listened to.

At the first opportunity, Marshall slipped away, pretending to look at all the pretty little horses, and found Lola packing her bag in the tack room.

“Lola? Can I speak to you?”

The woman jumped and her bag fell to the floor. She pressed her hand against her heart.

“Dios mío. Can I help you, ma’am?”

“I just wanted to talk to you about Luis Collazo.”

Lola said nothing. She didn’t bend to pick up her bag. She barely breathed.

Marshall walked over carefully, as if she was approaching a frightened horse, picked up Lola’s bag, and set it gingerly on the table.

“I spoke to the police, and they don’t seem keen on actually investigating. I wanted to see if you knew his family. If I could help get his things to his family.”

She moved finally, her shoulders relaxing slightly. She was a very pretty woman, with gray running through her hair like rivers through a dark field and smile lines crinkling around her eyes.

She laughs often and easily, Marshall thought.

“That’s very kind,” Lola said. “I don’t think the police will give his things to me. I only knew him a little.”

“His things are back at the cabins on Plum Street, the biggest one.”

Lola’s face changed rapidly—from surprise to suspicion to sadness to a sort of blank, friendly mask. Marshall recognized a woman who had to be hypervigilant—who walked in two worlds and was in constant danger in one of them.

“Thank you. I will take care of them.”

She suddenly wanted to help this woman, or at least show her that she wasn’t a threat. There were many threats, but not Marshall. Not now. She wanted to make the woman smile—to see the laugh lines at the corners of her eyes come alive, even a little. Even for a moment.

Marshall shoved her hand deep in a pocket inside her coat and rummaged. She produced a handful of bills, a stash of cash for emergencies on assignment, and crushed them against the table. She felt embarrassed. It was such a stupid, petty gesture in the shadow of a real tragedy, but it was all she had.

“You can send it to them, or use it to mail the stuff, or whatever.”

Lola looked at the money, and her face held the same friendly blankness. She didn’t look at Marshall.

“Thank you.”

“I’m investigating Luis’s death. Do you know anything? Did Luis tell you anything?”

Lola finally looked at Marshall and let the mask slip away. She looked sad and exhausted. Mostly exhausted.

“I told him to go. I knew Daily was trying to recruit him and I didn’t trust it. He pays better than anyone, but it’s not worth it. I just had a feeling.”

Marshall nodded. *A feeling* made all the sense in the world.

“I thought he listened, but then I heard they found him.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Please keep going. If you can. Some justice for Luis would be...”

“I’ll do what I can.”

Marshall felt she should say something else, something to acknowledge the jagged scar that ran through the whole town, that sat between them like a tectonic plate, but instead she nodded and left. As she closed the creaking screen door behind her, she saw Lola press her fingers against the money, as if to see if it was real.

Roswell met her in the aisle and yelled, "It's time!"

Dr. Foster gave her the ghost of a smile, and Marshall saw two long legs coming out of Star, sealed in a purplish sac.

"Now, push!" Thomas said, and Stacy laughed.

"Haven't you learned not to tell a woman what to do?" Stacy said. "Did you do this when Amy was pregnant?"

Roswell laughed, loud and bright.

Something electric was happening, something that made these hard, no-nonsense people shine. It was infectious. It refused journalistic detachment or cynicism.

Marshall was confused, but felt a rush of alien joy in her chest. Her eyes were wet. There was a hushed energy, and then an explosion of talking and action, and then a vibrating hush again. Someone clapped her on the shoulder, a friendly and familiar gesture that confused her but made her smile.

All at once the baby was out, soaked and lying in the remains of the purple sac. Dr. Foster was hovering, but mostly leaving the very new creature alone.

Thomas cheered.

Marshall cheered too, and her voice felt like a bright thing with wings.

Her whirling joy caught on a snag and stumbled.

The grove had stuck in her head—Brittany's story of the crying *thing* in the barn, caught halfway between horse and human.

So when she looked at the foal's hooves and saw rubbery tentacles bursting out of them, she gasped and covered her mouth.

"That's normal," Roswell said quickly. "That's totally normal. It's to keep the hooves from cutting her up inside. They'll fall off."

Thomas laughed and slapped her back in a friendly way, but she felt a little sick, and some of the joy drained out of her. Marshall blotted her face with her sleeve and looked at Ros, who was still beaming at her. She felt lighter in a very physical way, the way vomiting can sometimes take the sickness with it and leave you feeling new.

“How many days until it can walk?” she asked Roswell.

“About ninety minutes,” Thomas supplied.

“You’re fucking with me.”

She cringed like she had cursed in church, but everyone laughed in unison.

Dr. Foster said, “My mother always said there was a lesson about human nature in that, the speed at which a foal can run.”

“How so?” Marshall asked.

“An infant’s behavior reflects the core of a species. Just after being born, a foal can run. What can a human newborn do?”

Shit its pants, Marshall did not say aloud.

“Cry for help.”

CHAPTER 28

DAILY

It followed John Daily all the way to the edge of town.

Or so he thought. He kept catching it out of the corner of his eye.

It stalked behind his car, and when he slowed to take a turn, he thought he caught a glimpse of it moving between the red and yellow trees.

His truck rattled over the Redhart Bridge and he felt it fall away—all the hate and violence of it, tied to the town that hated him.

He took a deep breath and felt so much better. Immediately his brain replaced it with an *I'm not sure*. It was only a shadow between leaves. It was only a dead stump. It was only a flighty deer. It was only. It was only. He swallowed and set his eyes back on the road.

It was a longer drive than he remembered, but when he got to the city, he still felt a little unreal, a little detached. Leaving the forest didn't mean the forest left you. Seeing so many cars, so many people, made him uneasy.

He hated the city, hated that no one knew him, hated that his power was so far away. His intimidation relied on his reputation as well as decades of bad blood, of good intentions, of terrible luck, of damned, cussed politeness. The city, with its million people, forgot pasts at a breakneck pace. It had already forgiven a dozen sins that morning that would have each, individually, burned Raeford to the ground.

Emma's building was old, the paint cracked and chipping. Still, there was a coffee shop downstairs, and wasn't that what every young girl wanted when she moved to the big city? Daily took a moment to appreciate the irony that the city's ruin was fashionable, where it would be pitiable back home.

He went up the back stairs, which smelled strongly of weed and beer. Emma opened the door before he even finished the final flight of stairs, as if

to spare herself the sound of his knocking. She looked thin, he thought, and had obviously slept in her glitter eyeshadow. She chewed at the bits of nail polish on her fingernails.

He smiled at her, and she watched him climb the last few stairs, looking like a puppy who thought it might be hit. She didn't let go of the door.

"How are you feeling?" Daily asked. "Have you been to the doctor?"

Emma made a face.

"No. What am I going to tell him?"

"Tell him you miscarried," Daily said, reminding himself that she was just a girl, still a child. "I worked too hard to get you somewhere safe just to have you die of infection."

Emma shrugged.

Daily smiled.

People liked to think they were special. They liked to think that dogs and horses liked them when they didn't like anyone else. They wanted to be the only thing in the world that could turn a person from darkness. He knew how to use that—to pull people along in his wake.

Gently, he shoved a beer can aside so he could sit in the single folding chair beside the window. Emma had to stand in front of him, her arms crossed over a worn shirt, a shirt he'd seen her cousin wear, with a bear standing on its head on the front from a television show that had been off the air for fifteen years.

"Now, who told you what to do?" Daily asked.

"I don't know."

"You don't have to lie. I won't do anything to them."

"I don't remember."

"So what did you do?"

"There are signs you draw in the circle by the tree, the big one beside the church. You have to say a bunch of words, or sounds. They're supposed to be Latin, but I don't think so."

He raised his eyebrows.

"I can show you. I can show you how it works."

“The rumor is, it didn’t work. That you showed up at Foxglove with a baby.”

“It worked!”

“Tell me how it was supposed to work then.”

“I just wanted it to be done. I was sick all the time. Everything hurt, and I didn’t want any of it. I was so tired all day. I woke up tired. I threw up so much my throat bled. I spit up blood in math class! I knew it would—I just wanted it to be done.”

“I understand.”

He needed her panic done. He needed her focused. “You didn’t have anyone to support you.”

“I didn’t!”

She was pacing now, chewing at her fingernails again between words.

“Mom and Dad wouldn’t even look at me, and Grandpa spit on me. I knew they were going to throw me out, even before they did, I knew it was coming. And I couldn’t stay with Ros. I didn’t even want to see—”

“It’s okay, Emma.”

He stood up, placed a hand on her shoulder, and directed her to the chair. She collapsed in it and buried her head in her hands.

“And they told me, my mom told me, *it’s going to tear its way out*, or they would cut me open and pull it out, and I couldn’t even afford to go to the hospital, anyway, and I was so afraid. How was I going to feed it? Everything hurt.”

“I know.”

“I thought it worked fine,” she said, “without the price. Only Sammi talked about the price, and I thought she was trying to scare me.”

“What was the price? It’s a death, right? I know that much. Someone has to die.”

“You have to kill someone bad. She said her cousin killed her dad—someone you’re really mad at, someone you blame.”

Daily nodded and Emma could only blink at him.

“Did you know that?”

“I had half the story,” Daily said. “I knew there was a sacrifice, if you will. Boys tell scary stories in Raeford, too. So, you couldn’t do it?”

“I didn’t hate Ros. I don’t hate him. I just wanted it to be over. And I told him to leave it in the barn and it would just go away, but he went and got it! He should have just left it.”

Did she hate me? Daily wondered, ignoring her dig at his grandson. *Is that why it’s coming for me?*

He wouldn’t entirely blame her. But she had called the monster and just set it loose, and now the reckoning was upon them.

Did she hate the whole town? Again, he couldn’t blame her. Unfocused on a single target, what would it do? Would it take them all?

His mother had talked about it, the monster in the woods, something that was a wild animal, and, like a wild animal, was dangerous and unpredictable. As with a wild animal, there were fences and locks on doors and traps to set to keep everyone safe.

Something occurred to him, sudden and hard as a punch to his gut. It shocked him so much that his usual soft expression collapsed for a moment, and Emma froze and watched his eyes widen in horror.

He hadn’t been in town when Ros was born, and had never asked about that night—doctors, pushing, and screaming, he assumed. It was not his place, he thought, as a man—as a father and grandfather. It had happened, and that’s all he needed to know. His ex-wife barely spoke to him, anyway, and he’d long since been uninvited from the family home. He saw Ros as an infant, new and screaming, only twice, at the little white church on Sundays.

But where had the Bently man gone? He’d never liked that son of a bitch. He was always too hard on Agatha, laid his hand on her, pushed her around. Daily knew he was no peach himself, but Agatha deserved better.

Where had he taken off to? After the birth, he was just gone. It seemed like a blessing—Ros there and the man gone. He hadn’t even questioned it then. He’d just been glad—thought it was about time.

Where did he go?

Was his gentle little girl more like her old man than he thought?

“I think you need to come back to town,” Daily said. He tried to say it softly, as if it was for her own good and not his.

“Please, no.”

“None of the other sacrifices have satisfied it. It’s going to come for Ros anyway—maybe even Phillip, too. We have to help them.”

“I have to work.”

“I’ll give you money.”

“No, I have to—”

“You *have* to. I can stop paying your rent, if that helps.”

Emma bit her lip. Her chewed nails were bleeding. She wouldn’t meet his eyes, looking out to the fire escape.

That’s right. Do the math. Even with that new job, you can’t stay here without me.

“Just for a while. Just until I know we’re all clear of this.”

She nodded, twice.

“Good. Good girl. We’ll just figure this out together. Together we can fix this.”

He saw that she believed him. Bless her heart, she always believed him.

CHAPTER 29

CARTER

Carter had a pink plastic trash can on her passenger seat in case she needed to vomit on her way home from the diner. It happened more and more often, even though Agatha said the sickness got better in the second trimester.

It was not better.

And then there was the pain—constant, distracting, and arduous. Her joints were the worst, her ligaments loosening in preparation for the baby—literally deconstructing her body just a little bit in order to produce and exorcise a human life.

There was also the thinning of her hair, the brittleness of her fingernails as the baby leached nutrients from her body. She wore period pads every day because she could no longer predict when a giggle or a sneeze would make her pee her pants.

She was losing control of her body, becoming an inhabitant of a haunted house. The little ghost in her stomach disturbed her, would not let her sleep or eat or even walk in peace. She was no longer alone, and yet the presence with her was incommunicative, silent, constant, heavy, and aching.

But none of it, no symptom, was worse than the exhaustion. Several parents, laughing, told her it was nothing compared to chasing a toddler, but that could not be true. It absolutely could not possibly be true. The exhaustion went down to her bones. She felt as if she was being dragged down into the center of the earth. The will required to pull herself out of bed in the morning was monumental. It was enough to move the sun.

She did not vomit this time. She made it home with the contents of her stomach in place. She took a deep breath and summoned the strength to wobble out of the car. She made an extremely unattractive sound to accompany the movement.

The apartment was cool and dark and Carter didn't turn on the lights right away, feeling like a deepwater fish returning to the safety of its cave.

She dropped her purse on a pile of library books she really needed to return. She felt terrible, because they had been special-ordered in, on some topics she'd wondered about in natural sciences and astrophysics. She used to listen to those things on tape when driving home, let the poetry of the universe wash over her, cleanse the bacon grease from her hair and the blisters off her feet.

But she couldn't really listen to anything in the car right now because of the barfing. Audio stimulation triggered her motion sickness, another gut punch from biology.

The doctor warned her it would get worse. The doctor told her she was older, and thus could expect some complications. At best, the peeing would probably continue after the baby arrived. The doctor asked if she had someone to stay with her for the first few days. *Why?* Well, you may not be able to walk. You may not be able to climb stairs. You may not be able to get out of bed. You will be in pain. You will be in a lot of pain.

She sat down on the couch and looked at the crib, still in pieces against the wall. She needed to construct it. She needed to make it whole. *Any day now*, she thought. She was so exhausted. She was so sick. She leaned forward on the old couch and put her head in her hands.

The earth heaved under her and her stomach heaved within her. The baby turned. She did not vomit this time.

When she looked up, it was looking at her through the window.

Then she wasn't sure she'd seen it. It was more of a sense, like walking past a glass door and feeling the winter outside. No, there it was, the white of bone, the flash of movement, the black against the dark blue sky. She felt fear and relief and horror and relief again. She could. It could be over and she would be fine and it would be over. She wouldn't need to pay the hospital. She could start recovering now.

She could be free. She could be free as the man who fucked her, ate cereal with her in the morning, then disappeared into the past. Did he groan when he stood? Did he change pee-soaked pads in the bathroom? Did he

cry at two a.m. when he couldn't sleep because his spine could not take the weight of the creature inside him? Fuck him. Fuck him forever.

“No,” she whispered. “No. Thank you. No.”

And it was gone.

And she felt better.

CHAPTER 30

BROWN

Father Brown had watched the reporter arrive and watched her leave again. He knew what she was up to, what she was looking for, and likely found, and he thought that he should shoo her away. He should, he considered, at least sit her down and explain things—how the town could be two things at once, godly and irrational, careful and faithful, but he reminded himself that she would be gone soon, and it would serve the town right to have pictures of the ugly grove all over the city newspaper. That would remind them how the city saw them, as backward and ridiculous and even a little dangerous—untamed. Yes, it would be good for his town to remember where they stood in the world. Maybe it would send a few of the strays back where they belonged.

She wouldn't understand, a woman like her.

He had a thought for his homily about transience, about how changes which seemed so large in life, really the end of the world, could be familiar by the end of the week. How it was good to have a center that did not react to change, like an anchor or—was there a farming analogy he could use? Did horses change? He retreated to his desk, typing away on the ancient laptop his predecessor had left behind, trying to leap the great metaphorical hurdles.

An email popped up in the corner: the Carpenter woman again, still wondering if little John could get a last-minute spot on the mission trip. He knew very well that she was trying to get him out of town for a while, until things blew over with the girl and her family, but it was probably best not to have a boy like that—

He shook his head. He hated thinking about these things.

When these things pass, he insisted, when the way clears and the struggles fade away, we should not be surprised to find that God is still there—in fact, that he never left.

Yes. He must get that down. That was lovely.

There was a crunch of gravel outside, the heavy wheels of a truck crushing the driveway. It wasn't loud, but it made him jump. The little church and graveyard were working their way into his skin, into his veins. He could no more ignore someone walking across it uninvited than he could someone walking across his face. He stood and realized it was dark outside. How long had he been at work?

That gave him pause. There were not many people who would come to the church at night. It could be teenagers, messing around in the graveyard, trying to scare each other, but he doubted it. Everyone was on edge this week. Even if they didn't know why, they all felt it. The town was part of them as the church was part of him, and something heavy and unbidden was walking upon it.

He looked out one of the stained-glass windows, through a dove's wing, one of the few vantages that gave him a view of the woods.

He knew them at once, Daily and Jake, and a third man he couldn't recognize immediately—a stranger or a longtime stray. They walked toward the grove and Brown felt every part of him go cold and hard as ice. He turned away from the window and strode to the door, confident and brimming with righteousness. But the feeling faded the moment he touched the doorknob. If he opened the door, he would be exposed—Daily would see him silhouetted against the light of the church. He would have to yell and then walk over to them and then...and then what?

Would he hear the man scream, he wondered?

He prayed. Or, rather, he knelt in front of the massive, white cross and mumbled the words of prayer, but felt nothing.

He should call the police, he knew. He should call Jason, who always seemed to know what to do—who at least had an idea, who had told him about the silver bowls and the milk, who helped him clean up after he'd ignored the advice and the thing had broken in.

Father Brown stood. He went to the window again, but could see nothing but the darkening wood, the black forest against a dark blue sky. He went back to the cross. He knelt again.

When the scream came and then the gunshot, the priest jumped and ran across the church, turning off all the lights with a single sweep of his hand. It was an instinct he didn't understand, and now he was in complete darkness in an empty church. There was no more sound, and despite how loud and sharp it had been, Brown told himself he'd imagined it. He'd imagined all of it.

He did not turn the lights back on.

Carefully, he felt his way up the aisle, touching the pews, reaching for the next one with trembling fingers.

Barns have aisles, he thought stupidly, his mind reaching for calm and finding nothing. *Barns and churches have aisles, because they are sacred.*

He found the wall and felt along it to the tiny hallway, to the office. The small lamp on the desk bathed the room in yellow light and he remembered to breathe again. He pulled the newspaper from the stained-glass window and shoved the crumpled paper against the window facing the graveyard. He didn't leave until long after midnight, and by then Daily's truck was gone.

"Our Father," he said out loud as the keys shook in his hand, but his mind would not generate the next words. He stayed stuck, looping on those three syllables. "Our Father. Our Father. Our Father. Our Father."

CHAPTER 31

ROSWELL

Before the sun was up the phone rang, buzzing on the table beside the couch. Ros was already awake. The baby had screamed all night and he'd walked from one end of the living room to the other, his heart beating hard against his chest. Sometimes his mother got up and took a turn, but Ros could only lie in his bed trying not to think of the *thing* in the driveway. He got up, took the baby back, and kept walking. Phillip ate, and then dozed, and then woke up screaming again, as if waking from a terrible nightmare.

What could he possibly be having a nightmare about? Ros wondered bitterly. *He hasn't seen anything yet.*

Already his brain was trying to rationalize it, explain it away with fear or shadows or a deer or even a horse wandering free. There were stories of a whole herd of horses that escaped, one at a time, from this farm or that, and now roamed free through the forests of Raeford. That is what he saw. It was just a loose horse. Just a loose horse made of night.

He put Phillip down.

If the baby was going to scream anyway, Ros might as well answer the phone. He knew who it was before she spoke, but only a moment before. He felt that she was there, like a weight hanging above his head. It was like watching a bird fly toward a window, knowing it was going to collide with the glass—a sudden clenching of the heart and lungs.

"Ros?" Emma said. "Is that him—the baby? Are you okay?"

"Emma!" he said, trying to ignore the weight, the beating of his heart, the screaming of his child. "Where are you?"

"I'm back in town," she said. "Daily said I should come, that you're in trouble."

“I am,” he said, suddenly sure he was right—suddenly confident in what he had seen and felt the night before. “I am, Em. I don’t know what’s happening. It all happened just like you said, but—”

“I fucked it up.”

“What is happening, Emma?” Ros asked, and his voice trembled. “I saw something, last night. Is that the thing?”

“Oh, God. Daily summoned it. I told him how. I tried. He said he was going to fix things, but he just left me here and then he—” She faltered. “He got back really late. Jake’s passed out. There was blood on his coat. I don’t know what they did. Let’s just grab the baby and go.”

“I can’t. I can’t leave Mom. You should take him.”

“I don’t want him. I just don’t want—”

All of this, he finished for her. *Any of it*.

“Promise me you’ll take the baby and go,” she said. “I’m going to leave soon. Just promise me you’ll go.”

Roswell had never lied to Emma, at least he didn’t think so. He’d done her a lot of wrong, and hurt her deeply, but he’d always been honest, and when she told him about the ceremony, and when she’d called him and told him that a horse in his stable was about to give birth, he’d believed her. She had begged him to just let it go, and told him when he woke up the next day it would be a horse and everything would go back to normal, but how could he get up every morning and look out in the field at a colt bouncing through the mist and know that it was his, that he once had the chance to love and be loved, and that he had abandoned it? It would be a wound reopened every day. He imagined the baby would love him the way his mother once had. They would hold each other. They would say kind things when the night was dark and frightening.

But this was too much. It was, all of it, too much. How could he leave the place that was him, that was stitched into him? How could he leave the horses? They were like the eyes in his head, the bones in his hands. She knew. He knew. He looked out the window toward the forest, where the old stone house stood like a forsaken monument.

“I promise I’ll go,” he said.

CHAPTER 32

MARSHALL

Ever since her husband died, Marshall had wanted to follow him.

She didn't want to die, exactly—not the act of dying, anyway. What she wanted to do was stop for a while. She just wanted to cease the actions she was required to take—bathing, eating, moving, speaking. She wanted to exist outside of time, where her mind would not be forced to drag itself through each day as if through broken glass. She wanted a time-out, and since nothing like that existed, she wanted the closest thing to that, which was to die.

Was that why she had driven the car into the wall?

No.

Probably not.

But she had felt guilt, about Joseph and the baby, and the relief, and it lessened slightly when she punished herself.

She could not say what kept her from completing it. Perhaps it was simply laziness, or rather a kind of momentum. She simply didn't kill herself, and then didn't the next day either. She got up. She went to work. She sat in meetings. She delivered her work on time, though she knew it was a little short of her usual work. She continued in this way until her editor, Carlos, interfered. She might have continued that way forever had Carlos not interfered, she thought.

Joseph was dead, but life went on. That's what she'd thought.

Of course, the truth of the matter was more complicated. She got up for work a little later than she should. She dressed in clothing that may or may not have been washed. She was quiet in meetings, or ranting at someone's desk, and the notes she took were disjointed and incomplete. A conference was held, without her knowledge, about what should be done with her.

It was an act not of judgment, but of mercy. She hated them for it.

But this morning, something strange happened—she thought, *Maybe they were right. Maybe they'd been right.*

She washed and dressed and tried to dredge up the feeling from the night before, the wonder of the infant, even the horror of the new. These feelings flickered for a moment, like a spark against the cold ground, hot and bright.

Maybe she just needed a smoke.

No one was in the lobby, but she found the staff in the parking lot: the front-desk girl from the first night, a few maids, a man in a chef's coat, and a few people in cowboy hats and jeans, standing at the end of the lot, near the fence. Marshall lit her cigarette and wandered over to them. One of the cowboys turned—had she seen him at the church? They all looked the same. He frowned at her, and the frown communicated a sort of fatherly warning: *Brace yourself*. She took a deep pull on the cigarette and stepped into the group.

It still took her a moment to realize that they were looking at the fence and not past it—specifically the top section, on which there were several lines of particularly sharp barbed wire. On some of the spikes—too many of the spikes—little songbirds were speared. They hung dead, some with their wings pressed in tight to their bodies, some with their wings dropped and their heads flung back.

Marshall winced and looked down at the ground, trying to scrape the memory of the dead horse out of her brain as it rose hot and horrible at the sight of the birds.

“Kids,” someone mumbled.

“Trying to help or hurt?” someone else said.

“Stupid either way,” the girl from the front desk said. “Thanks for letting me know. I’ll get someone to clean them off.”

“Fucked up. You think this has anything to do with the body they found?”

“What? In the field?”

“No, the other one, in the creek. It was that guy who sometimes slept under the bridge by Oscar’s.”

“Didn’t hear about that!”

“Like I said, fucked up.”

The group dissipated then, wandering back to the hotel or their cars or down the road to either the café or the farm store. Marshall stayed, and then made herself look one more time, her heartstrings tugged by the little lives, or the absence of them, on display. It would have taken a long time to catch so many. It would take a lot of patience and effort, or maybe just a shotgun.

There was nothing she could do for them.

She followed the crowd heading toward the café and arrived long after they’d gone inside. It wasn’t a long walk, but she was panting a little by the time she made it and wondered if it wasn’t time to give up the cigarettes.

Nonetheless, she lit one and called Carlos. It was time to check in.

“Hush, Carmen! Yeah, Marshall?”

“Carlos, just updating. Got some ideas.”

“On that body in the field? Great—hit me.”

“No, not that. The horse tabloid story seemed like a dead end, except something’s bothering me.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Well, Ros said his girlfriend gave birth, but the vet said the horse did, and then I hear there is a ritual in town that transfers the birth of a baby to a horse but only through human sacrifice.”

She was thinking of the birds and the horse, the stake through the man’s heart. *Offerings*, she thought. She felt a little giddy. Maybe she was up too late the night before. She put her cigarette out and set her hand on the door handle.

“Anyway, true or not, I went to the ritual tree, and I think it’s similar to the stick in the murder victim, so I think someone may be trying to duplicate the ritual, but badly. Maybe Daily.”

“The ritual...tree? What are you talking about? I think this is getting away from you.”

“No, no, no. I feel like I’m getting the lay of the land now. I just—”

The coffee pot exploded the moment the bell rang above the door. It went like this—Marshall looked into the diner and saw Jason waiting for her at the counter, a mug in his hand, chatting with Carter. Carter’s hip was cocked to the side, flirting with the much younger man, or maybe just trying to get comfortable on her feet. Marshall smiled at her audacity, and Carter turned, picked up the coffee pot from the warmer, and went to fill the mugs of the new arrivals—the folks from the hotel. Marshall put her hand against the door and pushed. The bell rang. The coffee pot in Carter’s hand exploded. Broken glass flew across the diner and rained onto the floor.

“Jesus,” Jason said, “Carter, are you okay?”

“Carlos, I got to go. I’ll call you back,” Marshall said.

“No, wait!” But Marshall had already pressed *End Call*.

“I think so,” Carter said, her hands shaking. She looked down at her soaked shirt, at the broken glass lying around her shoes like a trap.

Marshall pulled up a chair and set it right behind Carter, in the center of the broken glass, so that she could sit. Gently, Marshall took the remnants of the pot, just the brown plastic handle, out of Carter’s hands. The other patrons were on their feet, grabbing napkins, murmuring gentleness. One woman had a hand pressed over her heart. Someone found a broom.

“I need to get up,” Carter mumbled. “I need to clean it up.”

“Just sit,” Marshall said. “We’ve got it.”

“God, what is with today?” Carter said, her face already less pale. “I almost hit Peterson’s mare on the way over here. She crashed right through the paddock fence. I was already on edge from that.”

“Well, I bet,” Jason said brightly. “Why don’t you let me get you a cup of coffee? Tea? What do you want?”

Carter rebounded with the endurance that seemed natural to her, etched into her face. She kept running her hands along her round belly, as if it was a talisman.

Marshall poured her tea with her pinky out and Carter let out a generous laugh. She seemed stable by the time they left. At least her hands weren’t shaking.

Carter gave them an exhausted but friendly wave as they walked out.

Jason smiled as he closed the door, but then his face dropped. Marshall appreciated, for a moment, that he seemed to trust her, or take her seriously enough, to show his real feelings.

“What’s wrong?” Marshall asked.

“Little bit of everything,” Jason said. “It’s just a weird day. You heard from Aaron?”

“Not since I talked to him last. You?”

“Nothing. I’m just going to go over there. See if I can catch him this time. Let’s go look at your tree first.”

“Deal.”

The road was free of fog, but the clouds lay heavily across the graveyard and around the church, like a great, white skirt spread over the field. Marshall parked the truck and they both sat for a moment, considering the beauty of the scene—the bright sky, a field full of mist. They hiked into the wet underbrush. There was less fog here, just a few wisps like lazy smoke rings coming to rest on the forest floor.

As the dark tree rose up before them, Marshall didn’t feel as giddy with discovery as she had the last time, or even this morning talking to Carlos. Somehow, with another person there, the place felt heavier, or maybe it was the fog or the birds or the memory of the dead horse. She suddenly wished she hadn’t come back at all.

“What the hell,” Jason said, and before she could ask him what he’d seen—what clue had told him something was off—he took the last few feet around the tree at a sprint.

Marshall jogged to keep up, but she didn’t reach him by the time he made it around the tree and into the glen.

Jason screamed—a single note, a roar, a howl—the noise almost completely animal, from a deep place of pain and fear and horror that made Marshall’s blood turn cold and her vision swim. Jason took a breath and screamed again, but this time it was words, almost random words: *Jesus Christ* and *fuck* and *no* and *Aaron* and *Daily* and *monster, you monster, you fucking monster*. Marshall ran to his side, took in the scene with him, and turned to vomit into the leaves.

The grove was much how she had left it the day before—the PBR cans, the circle, the carved runes, the soaked plastic bag of comics—but up against the tree, impaled on one of the broken branches near the bottom, was Aaron, his face white as the fog, his eyes open and looking upward toward the sky. A round hole just above his eyebrow on the left side. His mouth hung open and blood was smeared across his teeth.

Jason started toward him, taking a step toward the circle and another. Marshall wasn't sure what she was afraid of, latent magic or a damaged investigation or something she couldn't name, but she reached out and wrapped her hand around Jason's arm. He let her pull him away and she put an arm around him, shocked at her own forwardness. She just wanted to hold him, plead with him, get him to retreat so that she too could leave. She could smell it, goddamnit.

Jason sobbed, going limp in her arms, and she was able to half drag him to the other side of the great tree. He collapsed there, burying his face in his hands and bawling, huge and choking sobs, his whole body shaking with it. She was shaking too. There was vomit on her coat, and she could feel her body wanting to heave again, as if she could purge the image out of her mind through her stomach. It was so much worse than Luis, worse than Joseph even—the blood and violence of it, but more than that—Jason's grief hit her like the body hit her truck in the darkness.

Clumsily, she fished her phone out of her pocket and called 911. Hearing the dispatcher come on the line, she felt suddenly like her mouth was full of cotton. How could she communicate the thing she just saw? How could she begin to tell another human being about it? They couldn't possibly understand.

"He's dead. He's dead," Jason said, and his voice cracked with the white-hot pain of truth. "He's dead and they killed him."

Marshall, not knowing what else to say, wanting only to summon help and reassurance and someone to hold Jason so that she could run far, far away from the body, repeated this mantra into the phone.

"He's dead. He's dead."

CHAPTER 33

DAILY

Daily woke late and lay peacefully in bed, luxuriating in his empire. This was often how he woke up, the child of an economic depression who now knew plenty. Except for these few, peaceful moments each morning, his mind was always distracted with *need*. It was deeper than hunger, starvation—a void that faced no end, that saw nothing on shelves, nothing in pots, no warm bread or soup or meat no matter how much he gained and hoarded. He'd grown up hungry in a desperate, animalistic way. It left him not only thin, but constantly dizzy and dull-headed. It also left him vicious, and he would have gladly wrestled any morsel out of his sisters' and brothers' mouths if it had meant the death of that monster gnawing at him day and night.

This morning, he let the feeling wash over him for only a few, delicate moments, before despair and fear drowned it so suddenly it was as if his bed had fallen away below him and plunged him into freezing water.

The truth of what they'd done; the scream he could still hear; the blood he cleaned in the bathtub. It wasn't the first time he'd killed someone, far from the first time he'd been responsible for someone's death, but this was different—so different. It had always been distant, clean. The victims had been near-strangers, or else villains. It had felt like a predator overcoming a rival.

Not this.

He'd never had blood soaked so deeply into his clothes. He'd never stood in it until his boots were red. He rubbed the heels of his hands against his eyes and pressed until stars lit up the black.

Not now, he was busy.

Jake was at the kitchen table, bent over a mug of black coffee with his hand buried in his hair. Jake had never killed anyone before, and if Daily had had a choice, he would have eased the boy into it. This deed needed done, though, and he had to rely on someone desperate, loyal, and strong enough to lift a body onto the tree. He knew a lot of men who were a combination of two of these, but only Jake was all three. He had no idea how the girls were supposed to get the bodies up there, but it was the killing that was most important. He'd collected a lot of conflicting information about the ritual, and so he'd tried to do all of it and hope it stuck. And leaving the body there—Emma had been very insistent about that, though she couldn't tell him why. It was a risk, but he and Jake had been careful. Jason could howl and cry all he wanted, but the force wouldn't dare go toe to toe with him.

Jake looked up at him and tried to rearrange himself into something less flustered—less melted. Daily wouldn't judge him for being broken the day after a murder, especially *this* murder.

He would get used to it.

This wasn't heartless, he told himself. It was just the way business ran. It was just the way the world ran.

"You eaten yet?" Daily asked, trying to keep his voice even, like it was just another day.

"No sir."

"Well, why don't you clean yourself up and go get us something? Drive-through if you want."

He pulled a bill out of his wallet and pressed it on the table, watching Jake brighten a little.

"Take Emma too, if she feels cooped up."

Jake took the bill and disappeared into the bathroom. There was a small fight, a few raised voices, and a woman stumbled out, a tourniquet still in her hand, a line of blood running down from her elbow.

Daily poured himself a cup of coffee and looked out the back door. It was getting colder, the rain glittering a half step away from ice. He felt safer now. Nothing moved through the trees. No eyes glittered at him from the

branches. He was sure the thing couldn't die, but it must have been appeased. At the very least, it was no longer angry at him specifically.

"I can't find Emma," Jake said, suddenly at his side.

"What?"

The boy had his hat in his hands, literally in his hands, tugging at the loose threads at the back.

"She's not here. Unless she's outside."

"She's not fucking outside," Daily said. "It's freezing out-fucking-side. Where the shit did she go? You didn't hear her sneaking past you?"

"No, sir."

Daily forced himself to breathe, slowly, in and out. The past few weeks, the slow crescendo of them, had worn his nerves down to fiber. He was smarter than this. But there was no need to be hasty—he was free now. Did he even need the girl anymore? Only for insurance, only as a backup. He might as well go get her.

"I'm sure she just went to see Roswell," Daily said. "It's not like she can walk back to the city. We'll find her."

Jake nodded and was on his feet immediately, pulling on his green jacket.

"I told you to burn that," Daily snapped.

"It's the only one I have."

"I'll fucking buy you a new one. Drop it in the drum in the yard. We'll deal with it when we get back."

He waited for the boy to drag himself, head down, into the backyard. When he came back, he was shivering, but at least he wasn't spotted with blood. Jake got in the driver's seat and Daily crawled in, slower than he needed to for his sore body. He found it was beneficial to let people believe he was older and frailer than he really was. It was to his advantage if they underestimated him.

Jake drove toward town, going slowly so they could scan the fields on either side of them for any sign of the girl. The heat started working just as the fields disappeared and the forest sprung up around them, and they

settled a little. She wouldn't have wandered into the forest. If she'd come that way, she'd be on the road, or near it, and they'd see her easily.

"So you think it worked, last night?" Jake asked.

"I do," Daily said. "We did all the right things. We'll just have to see."

Jake nodded, and then something struck the side of the truck hard enough to tilt one tire off the road.

The tires screeched as Jake brought the truck to a stop over the yellow line. He looked to Daily, but Daily was looking past him, at the forest and the fog pouring out of it, rippling between the trees like a river of white clouds. Before he could blink, it washed up over the hood of the truck and rolled up against the windows, as if it was a flood. Daily felt cold and weightless, as if he might be swept away on that tide.

They could hear something—the groan of the truck, as if heavy bodies were leaning against it, bending it, crushing it.

"Drive!" Daily yelled. "Drive! Drive now!"

Jake kicked his foot against the gas, but the impact had knocked his arm against the gearshift, and he had to force it back into drive, and by that time the fog had covered the windows and the windshield. Daily had his hand on the door handle, pushing himself as far from the window as he could.

The sound was rising, a roar, a pounding, as if there was a herd of horses galloping past them in the fog. The truck was moving, rocking back and forth. Something gave way, breaking underneath them.

Jake slammed his foot back on the gas and the truck lurched forward through the fog and then stopped, colliding with something as solid as a brick wall, throwing them against the dashboard.

"Fuck!" Daily yelled.

There was a cry outside, a long, frustrated, painful noise, like an elk or a wounded deer.

Daily reached for the wheel and Jake looked at him with relief, almost smiling. The kid trusted him to get them out of any trouble.

Daily pushed against him, reaching for the door, pushing the buckle on Jake's seatbelt, which unbuckled obediently. Daily wrapped his fingers

around the handle, opened the driver's side door, and pushed Jake into the fog. It didn't take nearly as much strength as he'd thought.

He pulled the door shut, cutting off Jake's cry of surprise, hauled himself into the driver's seat, and hit the gas, ignoring the cry of fear, of pain, of horror from either the boy or the thing in the fog. John Daily sped through the fog with his foot all the way to the floor until the sun splintered the mist and he pulled out onto the clear road again. He kept driving, as fast as he dared, until he was well into town.

He pulled behind the farm store and pressed his head against the steering wheel. *Let it be enough*, he begged. *Let him be enough. No more. Take him and let it be enough.*

CHAPTER 34

MARSHALL

Marshall wandered into the graveyard, lit by the rotating blue and red lights of a dozen cop cars. They told her not to wander off, and she wasn't—not really. She was only getting away from it, the tree, the branch, the body, the horrible body. She'd seen bodies before. She'd seen gore, but never like this, never so abused and abandoned and—what was the word? *Fresh*. No, more than that. *Senseless*, like the birds, like the deer, like the horse. There was no reason, just death.

She tried to keep the memory of the foal in her mind, asked so much of it—to stand against the pointless death.

It was quieter in the graveyard, where she couldn't hear Jason cry. His grief was like a poison cloud, and she could feel it polluting her, dragging her back down the well. They'd put a blanket over his shoulders and put a cup of something in his hands and talked quietly and quickly while he nodded and didn't hear them.

Father Brown had wandered out of the church, a carefully constructed look of surprise on his face that Marshall saw through immediately.

It's not that she thought he might have murdered a man in the woods, but as she heard him sound shocked and flustered answering questions, she was sure he knew more about what had happened, what was happening, than he was letting on.

No one talks about anything, she thought bitterly. *They didn't even bother to name their own monster.*

The fog was taking a long time to dissipate, hanging around in little banks in the low points between graves and at the edge of the forest. It made the morning feel colder. Marshall turned up the collar of her jacket.

She paused in front of a simple black stone grave marker, the name *Linda Grayson* etched there, with dates, and *daughter, mother*, and below that, *Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures, and all deeps*. Beside this were two matching gravestones, side by side, old friends in gray. One of them said *Bernard Harrison, Horseborn 11/21/87* and the other said *April Grayson-Harrison, Proverbs 21:31*. On this grave, balanced on top, was a silver bowl filled with sour milk, the surface so clotted that it was a solid sheet. She didn't get too close, because she could smell it. There were flowers on the graves, and though they were dead, they weren't very dead. She guessed they'd been placed there in the last week.

She felt oddly touched that the daughter had kept the mother's name, had wanted to remain beside her. The whole town seemed to do a strange waltz around women like this, being ashamed of them, doing violence to them, using them as a lesson, and then also loving them deeply.

What was happening here, exactly—or even vaguely? Could she believe that an entire town could tangle themselves so deeply in a dark story, in a superstition, while going to the white church and bowing their heads in prayer to a god who would not recognize their true religion, their songs, their nameless rituals?

Marshall had a sudden vision of the dark, empty road, suddenly full of a dark body. She felt the impact shake her body again. She had hit something. She had. She never should have doubted it, even in the bright daylight. People believed what they could see. A baby passed around a table leg settled down to sleep, an iron horseshoe turned away a shady character, a bit of sage made the house feel homier. A baby was born from a horse, screaming and crying in the sawdust, and so the town filed it away beside the rosaries and prayer books and aspirin, just in case they needed it.

And yet.

There was a horse that gave birth. There was a baby. There was a tree. There was a price.

There was a price.

She was starting to see the shape of it.

She needed to talk to Agatha Bently. She needed to talk to Ros. The town was squirming with fear. Even a stranger could feel it, and people were starting to lash out at shadows to make it better.

Now another man was dead. Someone had mentioned another body. Was that related as well, or just another poor soul who slipped away in the dark?

How many more?

When it solved nothing, what would they do? A single death never solved anything. It only rearranged the pieces.

Her phone rang and she answered it reflexively. She registered, at the last moment, that it was her editor, a funny picture of his parrot destroying a notepad displayed on the screen.

“Carlos,” she said, by way of greeting.

“Marshall! What’s going on? I’m worried.”

At that moment, an ambulance came down the road, a little late, Marshall thought. The siren was so loud she had to wait for it to stop before she could hear Carlos again.

“Carolyn? Is that a siren?” he said.

“It’s not a birdsong,” Marshall said, feeling irritated by his shock, the worry in his voice.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Yes. I’m fine.” Marshall said.

“Marshall,” he said, collecting himself, becoming a serious editor again, a boss, a young man who was used to wrangling overzealous writers who were often older than him. “This has gone too far. I think you need to come home now. It was my mistake to send you away. Let’s get you back here and talk about everything.”

“I’m sorry. I’m not in trouble, I promise, but I think I was right about the ritual. I have to go talk to Agatha and—” She cut off, hearing a wet slosh behind her, and turned to find a young officer, who looked a lot like Thomas, coming up to her. He looked drawn.

“Ma’am, we’re going to need you to come to the station and give a full statement,” the officer said.

“A statement?” Carlos yelled into her ear, and Carmen yelled louder. “A statement on what? What is happening? Give your statement and come back home, Carolyn!”

“Okey-dokey, boss,” Marshall said, and ended the call, shoving the phone back into her pocket.

She would text him at the station, assure him again that everything was fine. It was fine. Everything was fine. It was not fine, of course. It was deeply, fundamentally fucked, but Carlos didn’t need to know that. She would tell him one day, back in the world of cabs and tall buildings where horses were only in tobacco ads.

She lit a cigarette.

“Any update on the Luis Collazo case?” she asked the young officer.

“What, the field guy? I mean, the only suspect is dead, so I guess it’s closed now.”

She hadn’t given Lola enough money. Not nearly enough. This fucking place. This rotten town.

From the front seat of the cruiser, Marshall watched Jason arguing with the paramedics, but he could barely lift his head, and Marshall willed him into the arms of the EMTs. She’d felt the pain shudder through him, could feel something tearing loose under his skin, and though she barely knew him, she wanted him to be okay. He would never recover, she knew, but he could be okay, like she could be okay. She liked Jason, because he was the type of man who liked to believe in people and was often wrong.

CHAPTER 35

AGATHA

Agatha Bently was a good trainer. Everyone knew it. She could have been a great trainer if she'd put aside her pride and just worked for one of the big farms. Thomas had tried to lure her away, but had only gotten Ros as an occasional workout rider. He was good, the boy trained with all the best of Agatha's skills, but he wasn't Agatha. Agatha could take an animal—nervous, abused, injured, uncoordinated, lost in the ring—and turn it into a calm, confident athlete. Imagine, everyone whispered, what she could do with a *real* horse. She was left with everyone else's cast-offs, and even so, she managed to get firsts and seconds, just a smattering, and even a hard-won reserve grand champion, working with half-broken mutts and little girls whose families couldn't even afford the correct color of riding pants.

Agatha Bently took the girls' small shoulders and taught them to keep straight, to look up, that a horse knew when you looked at the ground and would deposit you there. She taught them to use their tiny legs to steer a ton of flesh and blood. She taught them to use their arms, hilariously weak beside the strength of a horse, a thing that could do as much damage to them through carelessness as any human could through vicious intent, to direct the creature anyway, to hold their balance in defiance of fear.

"You can never fight a horse," she was fond of saying. "They'll always win a test of strength. God gave you a brain instead of strength; so you got to use it. You just can't fight it with muscle."

She made good riders, not pretty riders—that's why they rarely won—but good, solid riders who could get on any horse in the world and do something with it, and the horse would be calmer by the end of it, would be better for the next person working with it.

But none of this mattered to judges. None of this mattered when the girls rode into the ring on a horse that had a little bit of a limp, and always would, that had a fuzzy coat because they couldn't afford twenty-four-hour lights and a thick blanket to mimic eternal summer, that wasn't braided straight because a braider was expensive and the girls did it themselves, waking at five a.m. to stand on milk cartons and twist their horse's mane into careful, even braids, tied off with yarn. Their imperfection was noted on the judges' clean, white scorecards. They were incorrect—flawed.

But Agatha Bently loved them.

She'd been up since before the sun, feeding the horses, checking the tack, steadying the girls, watching as they warmed up, hissing *heels down, shoulders back* as they trotted by during competition. She was already exhausted, but they were doing well. A good showing considering how patchwork their training had been.

After lunch she'd set herself up at the gate of Arena A, waiting for her intermediate riders to be called on deck. She appreciated it when they put the youngest riders at the beginning of the day. Even if it was harder for them to get out of bed, it meant they didn't have to wait all day for their turn. They could change into sweatpants and run around to help the older girls, an important rite of passage, the way they learned the fussier details of shows and horses and, sometimes, crushes, rumors, secrets and hair and clothes.

Beside her, a group of lazy dads were babbling away.

"Kind of distracting, though, isn't it? All these tight pants?"

"Doing it on purpose, you know."

Agatha got up and moved her chair.

The fairgrounds were the nicest part of Raeford, probably because they all poured so much time and money into them. This is where horses were auctioned off, where championships were won or lost, where animals gained prestige and zeros on their price tag or stud fee. It's where children joined the family business. The place made her sentimental in ways she wasn't used to, and she was secondhand proud of the clean, white buildings

and the clean, white fences and the murals of chickens and pigs and galloping horses on the sides of the buildings.

The announcer babbled on about how “We’re moving right along and will probably end on time today, knock on wood,” which meant they were going to go late again, as usual. She checked her phone, secretly hoping for something from her son, some confirmation that he was okay. He’d been so torn up the night before, ragged and hysterical, and she’d had no idea how to reassure him, how to make him feel safe.

Her mother had never been good at it either, being the type of mother who did not kiss cuts, but wrapped them under a Band-Aid and told her, firmly, that it was a long way from her heart and she would be fine.

You’re not going to bleed to death. Get back on.

What did parents say to their children to heal wounds on their hearts? Maybe there was nothing to say.

There was no message from Ros. She hoped the baby was finally letting him sleep. Unlikely.

There was a message from Dr. Foster on her phone, telling her that the rescue horse was stable and could go home as soon as the fair was done. She hadn’t named it yet—she never named a thing unless she thought it was going to stay. She’d never named the two black cats who sometimes slept in the tack room, convinced they’d wander away one day when they were tired of her. She’d had them fixed, fed, dewormed, even held them under her jacket sometimes in the winter, as she taught her classes, but she didn’t name them. That was asking to have her heart broken.

That was her first mistake with Ros, naming him.

The dads were at it again, but they sounded worried this time. She looked up and saw immediately what they were looking at. Past the show rings (four of them on each side of the main road into the fairgrounds), a wall of fog was pouring out of the thin line of trees. It wasn’t coming with any kind of haste, but it was coming, closer now already. It was breaking around the posts of the farthest arena, flowing across the white sand, like an ooze of white plasma. Like a tide of ghosts.

“Knew it,” a woman said behind her, and Agatha turned to see Pamala Rapt, a woman who was sometimes called the Horse Whisperess, stomping back toward the barn, her phone pressed to her ear. “Just scratch both girls. Let’s pack up. Felt it in my bones all the way down. Not worth it. Well, tell him I’m the trainer and I want to—”

She could see Stacy from where she was sitting, and the young woman watched the fog come on with her arms crossed tightly over her chest. She turned on her heel, to head back to the barn or the trailers, and caught Agatha’s eye. They gave each other a curt, knowing nod before Stacy jogged off.

A group beside her didn’t move from their camp chairs and warm blankets. Another huddle watched with confusion as several horses and riders quickly left the warmup ring.

Out-of-towners, Agatha supposed. *They don’t understand.*

“Well,” the announcer said, harsh and tinny over the loudspeaker, “it looks like we’re going to get some fog. That’s what happens at fall shows, folks! We’re going to push back until two for our next classes and see if it lets up.”

A couple of the girls, their hair in pigtails, stood quickly and ran back to the barn to make sure their teams had heard the news. Agatha Bently did not move. She felt dread creep into the day. Behind her, she heard the rumble of heavy wheels on gravel and turned to see two horse trailers pulling out, turning onto the main road, their horses looking out the little windows in the back with nervous curiosity.

“What the hell?” one of the dads said.

“Yeah, I don’t get it. It’s just a little fog. This generation is full of fucking pussies.”

“Amen to that.”

Agatha felt the fear, rising from the soil like the fog. It rose from herself, like steam off a hot horse.

She thought of Ros and Phillip, alone in their little trailer, imagined the fog breaking against the siding, rising up the windows.

She stood and power walked into the barn, finding her small group of girls huddled together around an iPhone, watching a video of a very young boy with a terrible haircut singing a song about candy and sunshine. Their parents were drinking instant coffee and eating walking tacos out of Fritos bags while one of the ponies pushed its head as far as it could out of the temporary stall, trying to reach a bag of carrots.

She'd planned on telling them she'd had a call from Ros and had to go immediately, but when the little girls looked up at her, nervously, expectantly, she decided she was being ridiculous. Inside the barn, beside the warmth of the horses, away from the fog, it was easy to feel distant, to convince herself that she was being ridiculous. She put the phone in her pocket and nodded at the parents.

"They're delayed," she said, falling back into her most comfortable role of boss and trainer. "Brittany, can you help me get Jane and Mackenna into their coats and boots, so it doesn't sneak up on us."

The little girls jumped up immediately, their parents trailing behind, swirling cups of warm, cheap coffee.

The fog stayed, skulking around the edges of the fairgrounds, and Agatha felt like it was watching her, or waiting for her somehow. Several times she took the phone out of her pocket and thought about calling Ros or Carter—asking her friend to go check on them, but she didn't. Still, the anxiety grew in her chest until she could barely stand it. She felt like she was vibrating from it. She felt that all her students could tell, could see right through her. The morning turned to afternoon, and still the mist stayed.

It was too much. She pulled one of the parents aside as they were announcing the day's point totals.

"I'm going to head home for a bit, might stay the night, but I'd get ready to scratch if I were you. You'll get a refund if they delay again. Looks bad out there."

Not true. Not true, exactly, but she didn't think they would understand her, no matter how she explained.

"I'll be in touch, and I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Of course," the parent said. "Let me know if you need anything."

That's what they always said when she referenced Ros or the baby, as if she was sick or he was dying or something was wrong. She disliked it. She resented it.

"Just make sure everyone gets their blanket and has hay before bed," she said, and then left before she could change her mind.

She called herself stupid the whole way home, furious at herself for giving in to paranoia. It was already getting dark, the sun setting earlier and earlier as winter loomed. It did not help her anxiety. Wisps of fog nipped at the sides of the road.

What would they think of her—what would they all think of her if they knew how easily she gave way to a little nervousness? They knew as well as she did that she had separated herself from her father's sins only by the barest thread, the thinnest barrier. She could fail at any time. She might, she thought with horror, be failing already.

She passed the tree on the way to Foxglove. She saw a wash of flashing lights and realized her father had completed whatever it was he'd planned to do. This was just the aftershock, the horrifying ripple of that single stone sinking into the still pond. She thought this should relieve her, even as it horrified her, but it didn't. She felt cold, completely cold, as if she'd been standing in the snow for hours. It only stoked the feeling of unease already roaring inside her. *What had he done? Why hadn't she stopped him?* As soon as she was past the police cars, she sped up. They wouldn't come after her anyway, they were busy.

John Daily's truck was in her driveway. The lights of her home blazed behind it, bright and warm and welcoming, too welcoming, an open door where she should have built an iron gate. He was here. He was here and she hadn't done anything to protect her boys.

She was already getting out of the car before the engine finished clicking itself to sleep, tumbling out of the SUV and sliding in the mud. It was spitting rain again, and a deep cold was settling in. Winter was sinking its teeth into Raeford, and Agatha raged against it, not ready, not ready for any of this.

She thought of the inevitability of being wet and cold and then sick, of sitting in a furious nest on the couch, smearing Vicks VapoRub on her nose and thinking that she had been a fool to not appreciate the ability to breathe while she'd had it.

That's what this day felt like. It was like winter had arrived and she'd missed her chance to appreciate the heat and the peace and the mundane, and now the strange and terrible were coming to punish her, to punish all of them, for their ungratefulness.

From the bottom of the stairs, she could hear John Daily yelling and Phillip crying.

She tore the door open and stumbled into the room, ready to beat the man to pulp if he'd touched her son, or his son, or, hell, so much as the coffee pot.

The scene froze for her, as if they were a play and she'd yelled *Cut!* She saw her father first, because his presence was always the brightest, hottest thing in the room. It was like someone had dropped a burning coal into her home and she could only watch it sit there, burning a hole into her carpet.

He was standing a few feet from her son, her soft son, her hapless son, who wasn't looking at John Daily. The young man was staring at the floor, but his fists were closed, and he was standing between the old man and Emma and Phillip. The girl's hand was resting on Phillip's stomach in his high chair. She should pick him up, they all knew, but she'd never held the baby, never even seen him, and how could she possibly do it now, while everyone was screaming? Phillip was kicking his feet, still too young to understand anger, but watching carefully, waiting to see if he should cry again.

Emma? Why is Emma here?

She remembered the time Ros had brought her home and they'd all watched a movie together. There were ten minutes, when Ros ran to the barn to check on a noise, when the two of them were alone together. They sat in silence, the scene on the television frozen with a man's fist buried in another man's face. One of them was the hero. Agatha wondered if there was something she should say. Well, she knew there were things she should

say, but what were they? *Are you guys having safe sex? Do you need me to get you birth control? Are you going to marry my boy and convince him to leave me? Is he going to leave me anyway? Is it me? Is it me he's leaving and not the shitty town? Is he angry at me for keeping him here? Anyway, are you letting my son put his penis inside you?*

The whole thing was impossible and disgusted and embarrassed her, so she said nothing at all.

It was Ros who came to life first, maybe emboldened by his mother's presence. He raised his eyes a little higher, not meeting Daily's, but resting just above the man's shoulder.

"Get out of my house!" he yelled, and Daily almost smirked.

There was no stretch of the imagination that made the old double-wide Ros's house, not in any sense that let him scream about it. There was something a little endearing, though, about a young man staking his claim for the first time. There was something in Daily, the part that was a father and grandfather, that might have been proud of the young man, but Agatha knew he'd always found that part of himself easy to ignore.

"Shut the fuck up," Daily yelled. "You fucking know who you're talking to, boy."

"Get out of my house!" Agatha echoed.

She sounded shrill, she knew, a thing her father hated, but screaming was the only power she had, and screaming louder than him made her feel powerful, even if it was the power of an animal caught in a corner.

John Daily drew himself up to his full height and his daughter winced.

"Roswell, go feed the horses," she said.

She could at least free him.

"You stay right here," John Daily said.

"They need to feed the horses," Agatha said.

They might have been trapped there, perhaps forever, trapped in the quicksand of anger and resentment. Then Ros, with a very grown-up surge of conviction, picked up the baby, put a hand on Emma's shoulder, and the three of them walked out, letting the door slam behind them.

"Aggie, I need that girl to take responsibility," Daily said.

“What the hell are you talking about, John?”

She was afraid but also exhausted. She hadn't been wrong about needing to be home, and yet she resented being here. She resented her father and, yes, her son, for pulling her back into Daily's orbit. She refused to allow her mind to consider the reality, that it was more than that.

“Agatha, you know your pony wasn't pregnant. You know that baby came out of the barn that night,” Daily said. “You know what happened and you sure as hell know what is happening now.”

“No,” Agatha said. It wasn't a disagreement. It was a banishment. She wanted him gone, and the truth with him.

“Agatha, she fucked it up, and it's coming for us!”

“It's not coming for us,” Agatha said. “I haven't seen it. Ros saw it once and it didn't even touch him.”

“Then why is it stalking me?”

“You're insane. If Emma fucked up the ritual, it should come for her!”

“Oh, bullshit. Everyone knows that thing loves you. You fucking bitches. You set it on us for no fucking reason.”

“Everyone hates you! Everyone in this town hates you! I hate you! Mom hated you! Everyone hates you! If it's after you it's probably because of *that*!”

“Oh, don't fucking pretend like I did anything to this *town*. You think something like that monster develops in a town that is healthy—that is thriving? I'm doing my best.”

“So that makes it okay?”

“You do what you have to,” Daily said, pressing his thin hand to his chest. “That's why I was never mad at your mom when she left. I know what I was. I know I wasn't an easy man to love.”

“She didn't—” Agatha started. “That's not how it is! You're telling yourself stories!”

Agatha felt the conversation falling into a familiar pattern, and she knew that in the days that followed she would think of all the things she should have said, but now she only felt. She was afraid. She could see her

father working himself up, the white widening around his pupils, his chest rising and falling as he hyperventilated.

“Aggie, listen, just fucking listen! I am not taking the blame for this. I am going to solve this. If it wants Emma, I’ll give them Emma, and if it wants Ros, I’ll give them Ros! Hell, if it wants the damn baby, I’ll give it that too.”

CHAPTER 36

EMMA

Emma was uncomfortable carrying the baby, but she did the best she could, and Phillip murmured against her. She felt panic, like something cold and alive was darting around her ribs. She'd worked so hard to escape the town, the quagmire of a future that she now seemed to be sinking back into. She bounced the baby a few times, willing him not to cry, because she wouldn't know what to do if he did. Already her body was starting to ache. Stress always made it worse, and she felt that if stress gave off light, she would be a burning pillar of it.

The barn smelled like sawdust and dirt and the thick, warm sweat of living things. It was a smell that was nostalgic for anyone who grew up in Raeford. She'd never loved horses, not like Ros did, but generations of her family had lived in a community built around a single industry that was more than an industry. Religion was closer to the truth. It dictated the organization of their lives, their morals, their futures. It was in her blood, but more than that, it was in her life—past and probably future, no matter how much she struggled against it.

The smell made her feel lonely and wistful. That smell had captured many young people who'd tried to get away. The thought made her look at Ros.

He looked beat. He looked so much older than when she'd left, and the familiar, complicated feelings she always had swirled around her head again. She'd never felt attraction to him, not really. He was handsome, sure, but she'd only ever felt that warmth and yearning for certain women in certain movies. Still, she thought she loved Ros in a way that had nothing to do with physical attraction. She was sure of it, more than she'd loved her cold parents. She wanted good things for him, and felt sad as she knew,

instinctually, he probably wouldn't have good things. This wasn't quite love, of course, but it was close enough in Raeford.

There was a bruise just over his eyebrow.

Some part of her felt she should apologize for what was happening, the confusion and violence, but that part had been so worn down by pain and exhaustion and the terror of her own body that it was barely a whisper. A few people had asked her, when she started to show, what she was having. Some of them, when she told them she didn't know, asked if she'd had a dream.

Did you dream about the baby? Well, was it a boy or a girl?

It seemed like just another Raeford thing, a weird superstition slightly out of sync with the modern world, but she'd seen the same thing on TV, and once, in the coffee shop under her apartment, a beautiful woman told another woman that she'd dreamed the baby was a girl, and that it must then be a girl.

She hadn't had a dream about her baby.

She'd had dreams about drowning.

It was dark and she was already exhausted from swimming upward from the heart of the sea. Something was following her. She could feel the pressure of its presence on her back.

Sometimes, if she didn't wake from fear at that point, she would find the ceiling, thick and solid and hot and pulsating slightly. She would push against it with all her strength, but it would not give, and the thing was coming and she began to scratch at the barrier, digging her nails into the soft surface and it was so hot, so hot, so hot, and then she would wake up drenched in sweat and in pain so deep she felt she was sinking into it. Her body, bloated and distorted, hated her.

Ros looked down at her and offered his hands to take the baby. She surrendered him gratefully.

"He's so big," she said, because it felt like the kind of thing one said about a baby.

"Yeah. He's already rolling over, trying to push himself up."

"Wow."

Ros balanced the baby in one arm and handed her a bucket of grain.

“How do you feel?” he asked.

“Not great today. How about you?”

“I’m okay.”

“The baby looks good. You did a good job.”

“Did he go get you? Did he bring you here?”

Emma didn’t like the anger in his voice. It made her wince. She knew he meant it to feel protective, but anger always made her feel unsafe.

“Yes. He said he’d stop paying my rent and I haven’t made enough yet and Jake—I don’t know what they did last night. I told them the rest of the stuff about the ritual and then they all went out together and he didn’t come back. Aaron.”

And then the world felt thick. Deep.

Cold.

CHAPTER 37

ROSWELL

The blood rushed out of Ros's face and he started stroking Phillip's back, as if his son was a ward against evil. But it was more than what Emma just told him. He was looking down the aisle at the few wisps of fog slithering in under the door. In his stall, the gelding kicked the wall—again and again and again. His energy spread, infecting the other horses, until they were all weaving nervously, making small nickering noises, kicking at their stalls. The gelding started biting at the wall, his teeth scraping the wood.

Ros realized, with the nuanced knowledge of someone who grew up around the animals, that they weren't afraid. They were overstimulated, excited, and that excitement was amplified again and again within the little herd—making a feedback loop that turned into anxiety.

Something nagged at him.

He hadn't wanted to come out into the dark.

Of course! The thing! The monster!

How had he forgotten? How was that even possible?

Phillip took a tiny breath and began to cry.

Ros dropped the grain he was holding, and it spilled across the dirt in a golden puddle. He put his arm around Emma's shoulder and moved her. The only thing in his mind, his cold, burning mind, was to take his son and his friend away, away, away from the thing that stood in the driveway and smelled of blood and rot and then slipped out of his mind when he looked away. He needed to go away from that. He needed to move them away.

"What is it? Is it coming? Is it here?" Emma whimpered.

Ros couldn't speak—couldn't answer her. His fear was like hot resin between his bones, in the nooks of his joints. The fog was coming. He could feel it behind him, too. The tendrils of fog reached for him as they stumbled

out the back door of the barn. The world was white and gray. Behind him, the horses started neighing, a thing they did not usually do, not like in the movies. Horses were usually very quiet. It took a lot to make them scream.

CHAPTER 38

AGATHA

“You will not touch that girl and you will not touch my—”

The world became thick and heavy.

There was a groaning sound, as if the whole house was being squeezed by a giant fist. It made Agatha think of the movies she’d seen of submarines, crushed slowly from the outside. She and Daily froze as the silence stretched on, and then it came again, a groan and creak of metal.

“Fuck, Aggie! You got a gun in this place?”

Agatha ran for the window, pulling the blinds aside so violently they tore from the wall. Outside the window she could see only a strip of black sky, the very tops of the gray tree branches reaching for it, and a wall of white fog. She could hear the horses screaming.

Agatha didn’t look at him. She screamed her son’s name and ran out the door.

Daily reached for her. His fingers slipped across her jacket and he immediately retreated, like a drowning man escaping the tide.

The door slammed behind her.

The yard was choked with fog, thick as smoke, thick as water. Agatha waved her arms in front of her on instinct, as if she could swim through the whiteness. For long minutes she was blind. The world was white and vast and she alone existed in it. The fences, the barn, the house, her father, her son, her grandson were gone, and she barked out a sob. The monster was coming for them or her father was coming for them. There was danger and she wasn’t with them to fight it away. She had thought she knew the rules, but everything was changing. She had thought of herself as independent, an island unto herself, but being so alone was horrifying and she was terrified.

You didn’t go into the fog in Raeford.

In the fog you were blind and could not follow the right path.

She had walked to the barn every day of her life for decades. She walked now, feeling as if her feet were falling into the grooves of her own footprints. At the perfect moment, she reached out her hand and found the barn door. She breathed and the fog swallowed up the mist of her breath.

She pulled open the door. The aisle was empty except for two red plastic buckets of grain, overturned, a line of gold against the cold dirt. The horses were calmer now, were still wandering around their stalls, and the gelding kicked now and then as if to remind everyone that he had feelings, that he would not be ignored.

Agatha swept the barn for Ros.

She checked every cupboard and corner, too afraid to make a noise. The cats watched her from the rafters with shining eyes. The only sound in the place was the pacing of the horses, the occasional bang of a hoof against the wood. She could not find the children. What else could she do but call for them? She opened her mouth and let out a croaking sound that died, withering in the hush. She swallowed and tried again.

“Roswell!” she whispered.

She swallowed again.

No. This was her home.

This was her place of power.

“Roswell! Roswell! Roswell!”

There was nothing.

CHAPTER 39

DAILY

Daily watched Agatha disappearing into the fog, like a stone dropping into the water.

Gone.

He had a short window of time before the fog overwhelmed the house, so he left, running out the front door.

He had to run before he lost the truck in the clouds.

If he stayed, he would be cornered.

Nothing was going to corner John Daily.

He could feel the thing coming, feel his blood running cold already, feel the end of him, the blackness beyond. He kept forgetting to breathe, holding his breath until lights danced in front of his eyes.

Get out of my head, fucker!

His fingers closed around the door handle, but it took several long seconds of fumbling to open the door, to climb into the driver's seat. He slammed the door and tried to remember how to breathe again, pushing back against the ghost in his head.

As he looked up, the wave of fog slipped over the top of the mobile home, and the air was stolen out of his lungs again.

He started the truck and pulled out of the driveway, leaving it behind, wondering where he could run.

He should leave town, he knew.

He should go to the city.

The thing seemed to stay in town.

A podunk monster stuck in a shithole town.

Fine.

Keep the place! You two deserve each other!

It was true. If he left, he might be free of it, but the thought was disgusting to him.

He had built a life for himself. Well, perhaps not built, but dug—carved into the bedrock of the town. He huddled there, in his not-quite-shelter, clutching the weapons he had stolen from others, and he would not abandon it so easily. It was his. It belonged to him.

It was his.

He would find a way to stay.

Were these his own thoughts? Yes. He was sure.

Maybe it—no.

That was a horrible thought.

There was only him. No one could hear him. He would think his own thoughts.

Maybe it would take Aggie or the girl or his grandson or great-grandson and then he would be free that way. It seemed inevitable now. It was already coming for them.

So, he was already free.

One corner of his mouth rose, and he felt triumph.

The road ahead of him was clear of fog and he sped down it. He was John Daily and he was going home.

What the fuck did he have to be afraid of?

CHAPTER 40

MARSHALL

The walls were screaming again.

Marshall heard it on the way to her room and stood in the doorway for a moment, wondering if it was even worth showering and changing. The idea of carrying on with her day with the mud and blood still on her made her stomach turn, so she sighed and locked the door behind her.

They'd kept her at the station much longer than necessary, considering she didn't know anything and they seemed to believe that. She had asked, three times, about Jason, but the most information she got from the older officer was that Jason was fine, which was a lie, and that they'd taken him to the hospital, which was probably true. Then they drove her back to her hotel.

The noise went on and on, a screeching, shrieking noise that was like ripe roadkill in her brain. She showered and dressed quickly and sprayed her boots off in the shower.

On the way downstairs she tried calling Jason, but he didn't answer.

She cleared three notifications from Carlos.

Marshall, I'm worried about you.

What's going on over there? Are you safe?

You don't sound right. Please come home.

She could still hear the thing in the hall, and she passed a few doors propped open, as if the occupants of the rooms didn't want to be alone with the sound, or they wanted to be accessible if there was news of a solution. She waved balefully at a few of them. In the lobby, the girl looked up, her face a mask of practiced concern.

"We're aware of the problem and are trying to fix it as quickly as possible."

Marshall gave her a friendly wave and a nod that she hoped said, *It's no trouble. I'm no trouble. I'm just passing through.*

Outside, Raeford was almost impossibly dark.

She checked her watch, wondering if she was wrong, if she *had* fallen asleep and simply forgot, or taken a much, much longer shower than she'd thought. But no—it was only six. Sunset should still be a blush on the horizon.

It was a blackness that Marshall didn't see in the city, and it made her feel like there was something wrong with her vision. She was anxious. She needed to *do* something. She needed to *help*.

She scanned the dark road. Something was moving there, kicking leaves up, she thought, and then—no—a truck with its lights out, going incredibly slow, stupidly slow—creeping.

No, that was wrong too. Whatever it was, it was long, lumpy, like a truck carrying hay, but not that large. It came parallel to the end of the hotel parking lot and the floodlight by the bushes washed over a single corner of the massive, moving blob. It illuminated a hoof, a fetlock, a brown tail, a rump, the splash of dark dots against white hair. Horses, a herd of them. She blinked rapidly. There really was something wrong with her eyes.

Then she could see all of the details, pick out their bodies against the background clutter of buildings and shadow. A dozen horses wandering through the dark town. They were just walking down the street, as if they owned it, as if they belonged there.

It wasn't until a man came up next to her, one of the cowboy-hat-wearing types, his own mouth agape and his eyes wide, that she realized she was seeing something real, not a dream.

"What the hell?" the man breathed as the herd moved on, the faint red from the neon diner sign washing over their backs and reflecting on the whites of their eyes.

"Escaped, you think?"

"Seems like Raeford is just full of horses. When I was a kid, I'd dream about them swimming under our fishing boat and jumping between the tree branches."

“Wild,” Marshall said. “Should we call someone?”

“Nah. Police got their hands full at Foxglove I bet.”

“Why’s that?”

“Oh, missing kid or something. I don’t know the whole story.”

Marshall blinked hard and fast, trying to focus her racing mind.

“Welp, I need to be up in a few hours, so I guess I’m sleeping in the truck.”

“Good luck,” she said, and headed for her own truck.

As she passed the diner she slowed and squinted. It wasn’t open. The red sign shone across stools on top of the counter and glasses neatly stacked beside the pop machine.

It felt like an end, like an omen. She didn’t like that she’d become the kind of person who believed in omens.

She took the long way to Foxglove to look at the tree. Why? She wasn’t sure. She just needed to see it.

The tree was still surrounded by police, their lights off, a few officers standing around, looking bored, perhaps waiting for forensics, or simply guarding the area from curious townspeople.

Marshall stopped at the crossroads and watched the fog roll across the road. She remembered Jason changing course. He’d done it intentionally, but she’d noticed his hands tightening on the wheel. The town had infected her, its unease and superstitions. Her foot settled on the gas again, then back on the brake as the old truck grumbled and shook at the stop sign. She didn’t believe in ghosts and monsters, she thought, furious, even as her mind offered her blood running down trees, dark horses in the night, empty houses on cliffs that haunted families, fairy slippers on a newborn foal. She had been changed and she knew it.

She knew it.

She watched the fog puddle in the road before her, and then, as if stirred by a sudden wind, it lifted and wandered off back into the trees. With a sigh, grateful that her delusion and vanity could exist simultaneously for a moment, she drove forward.

The fog stayed between the trees, as if watching her, and she kept glancing at it, nervous it might see her watching back. She looked away self-consciously.

There was something in the road.

It was a body.

She stopped the truck, slammed on the emergency blinkers, and was out before she could be afraid that perhaps the fog would collapse on top of her like an avalanche and then—and then what? She would drown? She wouldn't fool herself and tell herself she wasn't afraid. She had no special power or strength that would save her.

She squatted over the body, a young man. He rolled toward her suddenly, reaching for her, like a drowning man suddenly spotting a raft. She tried to jump away from him, but he clung, gasping, pulling on her. She recognized him, though his face was swollen and he was covered in blood—the boy from the diner, the angry one. It made more sense now, that he was lying in the road, bleeding. She had known the first time she saw him that this was his future, or something similar.

“Easy there,” she said, and he blinked, breathed hard, tried to understand. “You’re safe. Can you stand? Let’s get you to the truck.”

“Brittany! Anna!” he yelled.

Then he began crying, sobbing—the kind of outpouring of sorrow that Marshall saw parents struggle through when talking about their missing children. She got her arm under the boy and helped him stand uneasily on his feet. She noticed he was missing a shoe and his foot was swollen in his tattered sock. He cried in pain, and then stifled it, looking nervously at the white fog prowling the edge of the forest. Slowly, with great difficulty, they made their way back into the truck and Marshall half lifted, half shoved him inside, feeling her shoulder wrench with the effort.

She glanced back at the fog and felt a strange, momentary connection with something that made her knees weak and her stomach lurch. It was difficult, absurdly difficult, to pull herself away from that spot, climb back into the truck. As soon as she looked back at the road she felt better.

CHAPTER 41

JASON

Jason did not sleep. He existed. His entire being—which felt mostly earth-shattering fury, enough grief to split the sky—was concentrated on continuing to breathe. He felt that if he did not, if he let his mind wander, if he let a single atom stray from this focus, he might immediately die. He would explode. He would run like water across the blue hospital floor. Someone was crying in one of the rooms, someone of indiscernible age. Was it him? It might have been him.

They'd told him they didn't want to give him anything, but would check back. When they checked back, he was sitting up and he felt not better but wrung dry.

He couldn't get the image out of his mind, not of the body, but of the boy he knew, the laughing boy, leaning back against the fence, his dark hair in his eyes, laughing at something Jason had said, some joke. Jason didn't remember what he'd said, but he remembered not being able to breathe, let alone laugh, because he was watching Aaron laugh, and that was the most important thing in the world.

When that image left, like a wave retreating from the beach, only then did the image of Aaron on the tree overwhelm him, and with it came a hate so deep and thick and dark it felt as if he were being submerged in tar. The few times he struggled out of those two fugues he could think only of Daily, monstrous Daily, Daily the devil, the nightmare, the horror from the pits of hell. Daily who stole his Aaron. Daily who stole so many people. Daily who was a rotting, contaminated sore on the face of the town.

Finally, Pots walked in, like a father checking on his grounded son.

"Welp," Pots said. "How're ya feelin'?"

"Better," Jason said. "Yeah. I'm better."

“Happens to the best of us.”

Jason nodded, trying to remember how to do things normally, to look like a normal person fully in control of their anger and sorrow.

“Am I good to get out of here?”

Was he speaking too slowly? Too fast? He wasn't sure.

“Yep. Let's get out of here,” Pots said. “Been a hell of a day.”

They walked out, Jason falling into a practiced swagger that he thought spoke of confidence and ease, but, instead, communicated a deep unease, like a hunting wolf. Pots flirted with an indifferent nurse while Jason filled out his paperwork. He looked up at a commotion at the front door and saw Marshall, standing in her brown duster, one hand in her pocket. She looked up and caught his eye and gave him a half smile that did not mask her relief.

Jason felt a strange calm, not enough to wipe away the horror and fury, but like a ray of light through the clouds of it. He liked Marshall, despite her crusty attitude and the scowl. Marshall had been the only one who cared. Marshall had listened to him. Marshall had *tried*.

There was a moment, fragile as a moth pinned to a board, where everything might have ended differently. He gave her a small, sad smile, and then his eyes drifted to the gurney coming in behind her.

And he knew the boy strapped to it. He dropped the pen. Pots didn't notice. The nurses didn't notice. To Jason it seemed like the whole room was roaring, like someone was driving a train through the hospital, and yet no one even looked at him as he walked up to the gurney. Not even the nurses and EMTs hovering around Jake noticed Jason. It was like he'd become a ghost, like he had died and been long buried in the ground of that foggy cemetery across town.

Only Marshall saw him, and moved to him, put her hand on his arm, as if to ground the horrible electricity coursing through him. He glanced up at her and saw, again, that wound in her that was familiar. It was like seeing someone with the same eyes, the same ears, the same nose that you thought for your whole life only ran in your family.

Jason looked back down, and Jake was watching him, his eyes wide but unfocused. He kept squinting and occasionally blinking frantically, then

staring again, as if willing his eyes to work correctly. The right side of his face was deeply purpled and dented slightly. Jason was willing to bet something was broken underneath, the orbital bone perhaps. His nose was almost certainly broken, bent at an odd angle and bleeding, the blood running over his chin and soaking into his torn shirt.

He was mumbling, a long, unbroken string of noises only some of which were words. Jason's cold fury broke like a wave against the boy's wretchedness. His disdain, his disgust, still lingered, but he was grounded again. His first thought was that Daily had done this to the boy, not with his own two hands, but he had ordered it. Surely the boy had done something wrong, had failed or betrayed the old man in some way, and had been punished. It was sad, and that sadness convinced Jason not to destroy him.

He leaned in closely to listen to the boy as the nurses looked questioningly at Marshall, as if she would explain what happened and what was happening.

"With the cold and the radio," Jake said, his voice rising a little, as if he was urgently trying to communicate his nonsense to Jason. "Tell my sisters. Tell my sisters they were right. It lives under the bark, in the road that the pill bugs dig, in the hair of the moss. It's here too, and here, and here. It knits your veins together. I have to stay late but I'll be home, Mom. I'll be home. Stop yelling. I'll be home."

"Jake," Jason whispered. "Did you do it, Jake? Did you and Daily kill Aaron?"

Jake blinked rapidly again. Jason was so close to him. He could see into his pockets. He could see the gun in his pocket, sliding slightly out, the black corner just poking out of the red hoodie. In a single motion he slipped the gun out of the boy's pocket and into his jacket. Jake didn't notice. Why did he do that? He already had a gun. The nurses and Marshall were talking about something he didn't care about. Marshall kept looking up at him.

Oh, right. He wanted a gun that was not his gun.

"I thought it would help," Jake said, a whine in his voice like a naughty child as his eyes unfocused. "Daily said it was the only way to save him. To save everyone. But the mud in my shoes kept me down and I didn't have

enough for lunch so I pulled the car around for you, Mr. Daily. We're all ready to go."

"Sir, please step back," one of the nurses said, softly.

"Okay, fine," Jason said.

Jake blinked at him, looking lost. He started breathing faster, making a quiet wheezing noise with each breath.

A strange thought occurred to Jason, that Jake reminded him of himself—not the horrible things he'd done, but his desperation. If he, Jason, had met a John Daily when he was a kid, would he be lying on a gurney with tangled thoughts, bleeding into his clothes?

His first instinct was *no*, because he wanted to protect himself, to think of himself as special—as transcendent, but he probably wasn't. He was probably only lucky. With that revelation, the anger flowered back, crisp and sharp. Marshall was watching him, and he had the sense that he was becoming one of her stories, that she could see all the intricacies of his pain and loss and was already thinking of the best metaphors for it. Pots wandered over, his face the usual mask of indifference.

"I'm going to go check on Ros and Agatha," Marshall said, with a tone that suggested that it was an invitation to join her, even a plea. *Please join me*, she seemed to say, *so that I know you won't do anything crazy*.

Pots stopped near her, put his hands in his pockets, and then arched an eyebrow at Jason as if to say, *Get a load of this*.

"Thanks, Marshall, but I have things to do."

He offered her his hand.

It was, they both knew, an end—a departing.

She took his hand and shook it, and she left, a last gift to Jason. He didn't have to be the one to walk away from her.

Jason let Pots go, swore he could make his own way home. Someone had brought his truck, Pots said, but was he sure? Well, okay. Lots to do, you know. It had been a long time since there'd been a murder like that, and they were trying to pull up all the old files from the basement because someone swore there was a pattern. Pots spit, as if to demonstrate what he thought about all that.

Jason watched Pots leave, then drove the other way, up the main street, past the paddocks with horses grazing calmly, chasing each other, the cold weather making them restless and joyful. They felt the tension of the town, but humans were always tense about one thing or another, and unless one of them was going to do something to you, or with you, it was best not to worry about that sort of nonsense.

Daily's truck was parked in front of the second house he checked, one tire on the grass of the front lawn. Jason sat staring at it, making it a symbol of everything, of every loss and near miss and shortcoming and addiction and death, especially death. He could just punish the truck, he thought. He could hit it with his car or piss in the gas tank or break the windshield. That would be it, his vengeance spent, and he wouldn't need to do any of the other things he longed to do, any of the things that ran through his mind.

He watched another car drive up and a woman get out, Jenny Davis, a girl two classes behind him. He remembered, fondly, the only time they'd spoken, when she'd grabbed his arm as he walked down the hall and shouted excitedly, "I can do a fucking handstand!" He'd smiled at her, awkwardly, embarrassed by her attention, and she grinned and went to the next person in the hall, grabbed their arm, and shouted the same thing, her excitement so great she didn't care who she told. She simply couldn't hold it inside herself.

Now she looked thirty years older. Her eyes were sunken, and she couldn't have weighed more than one hundred pounds. She moved like a marionette, as if she had to wait for each string to be pulled to move forward, to check her pocket, to touch her hair. There were sores on her skin, red and angry. She spotted Jason and froze, like a deer in the road, her eyes wide.

She changed her course and came to his door, clearly trying to act natural, like she just happened to spot him and decided to say hello. Jason rolled down the window so she had somewhere to lean.

"Hey, Jason," she said, carefully. "What's a guy like you doing in a place like this?"

"Go home, Jenny," he said.

“I just—”

“Go home,” he said sternly, and was shocked by the gravel in his voice, the threat it represented.

She startled, like a hit dog, and hurried back to her car. He watched her disappear around the corner and put his hand on the door.

He put his hand back on his lap.

He put his hand in his pocket and felt the weight of the gun.

He wasn't ready.

Not yet.

CHAPTER 42

THE HORSES

The horses knew its name and felt its confusion, its frustration. Like any creature, it was born with instincts and needs. Though those things were more nebulous, less tangible, they were still very real. And it *needed* now, because it had been denied. They knew that, like they knew when one of their herd was injured or one of their humans was afraid.

When it moved, it moved like the wind. When it was still, it looked a little like them. Sometimes it did both at the same time, like water in a bucket. It had hooves and a face. It had a spine that lifted out of its skin, and eyes—no, it didn't really have eyes.

It meant them no harm. It seemed to like being with them, so they tolerated it. It usually brought with it a surety of purpose. They liked that.

Horse people cling to the term *energy*, despite the uncomfortable magical thinking it implies, because it is difficult to explain how one human can ride a horse through fire without either flinching, while another, doing everything the same in a quiet barn, drives the creature into a frenzy of anxiety or fury.

Electric hands, they said, or *nervous seat*, but often they gave up and said, *She just has a bad energy. The horses don't like her energy.* There was no getting away from the word. They had to hope that one day science might discover something, like ultraviolet light or dark matter, that could be measured but not seen.

The thing that lived in the woods had a purposeful energy, had a direct energy, and the horses liked that. They appreciated that. Things that hunted them slipped up beside them or landed on their backs. This thing came directly toward them, walked with them, stood with them, breathed the air of the world with them.

But then something changed. They sensed it first in the humans. It was a tension, a vibration they didn't like. They didn't understand where the tension was coming from, but that didn't matter. Cause and effect were human things, their curse and strength. Horses knew that the stress was there, with them, like a shark in the water, and they hated it. When the thing from the woods came again, it wore that same tension, that uncertainty, that feeling that something was wrong.

What is wrong? they wanted to know, and the needing to know became desperate. *What is wrong? What is wrong? What is wrong?*

It was the humans' fault. The fear was always the humans' fault. The horses were the humans' fault, too, as well as the thing that visited them. They bred them both, named their parents, raised them and trained them. Now it was a product of that fear.

So they fled from it, and neighed when it came close, kicked at their stalls and tore at their water buckets with their teeth. This only increased the humans' anxieties, which fed the horses' fears. The fear fed on itself over and over and over until it spilled over and filled the valley with darkness and fog, and then the humans searched for their young, called their names, ran into the darkness to find them. The darkness—where the monster lived.

CHAPTER 43

MARSHALL

When Marshall arrived, the driveway and yard were full of cars and the small house was surrounded by people. There was a sense of purpose, and Marshall sat in her car for a few minutes, watching various people in Carhartt jackets and cowboy boots pointing and yelling and standing in lines, ready for action. A small group was bent around the priest, who was murmuring a prayer too quiet to escape the noise.

She checked her phone again. More calls from Carlos. She deleted the voicemails without listening to them.

Stepping out of the truck, she could hear them yelling orders, forming separate parties, planning to walk into the foggy woods to look for their neighbor's child. There were several young girls bustling around the barn, leading horses to the paddocks, pushing wheelbarrows with the energy of children who are suddenly gifted with very important jobs. They glowed with the responsibility.

Marshall squared her shoulders and moved through the crowd. She didn't want to be stopped, didn't want to be directed.

She spotted Carter half crumpled in a camo camp chair and headed toward her. To her surprise, the woman gave her a tired wave.

"What happened?"

"Absolute mess. Ros and Emma ran off with the baby."

"Ran away?"

Carter gave a noncommittal shrug.

"Ran from—?"

She couldn't say *monster*. It seemed too ridiculous. Surely Carter would laugh at the word, call the rest of the town over and point at Marshall's

stupidity. Or maybe it was Daily. The man seemed violent. If he was trying to recreate the ritual, maybe he was going after Ros.

Carter seemed to understand. She raised an eyebrow and gave a small nod.

“I can’t help with my feet swollen, you know. Agatha’s already out there, sweeping the forest. I have to sit here like a lump and wait. I can’t stand it.”

A man in a tan jacket, repaired in several places with duct tape, raised a hand, and the murmuring fell to a hum.

“All right, group two, let’s get in line. Thirty paces between, stay in sight of your neighbors. If you get lost, just turn around and walk straight back here. Sound off!”

The line formed and each person counted off.

Marshall laid a hand on Carter’s shoulder and squeezed. Carter held up a flashlight and Marshall took it, yelling “fifteen!” in turn.

They marched into the darkness.

Marshall smelled loam and leaves and almost immediately tripped and fell face first into the underbrush.

She was just a city girl, after all—a city girl afraid of the dark. Except, she reminded herself, there was something to be afraid of in the dark. She’d seen the blood run down the tree, the birds on the fence, the horse, the man, the boy in the road. She’d felt the sudden jolt of the car hitting something, when nothing was there.

Lights skittered through the leaves like glowing squirrels, just enough to get a glimpse of branches, leaves, thorns; casting shadows that confused the eye and the foot alike. All around her, people called for the missing children.

She tripped and fell again, scraping her hands along a rotting log. She pulled herself up and wiped her hands on her coat, swept her flashlight over her hands and saw spots of blood.

She probably shouldn’t smoke in the forest, right? But she really wanted to.

The voices already sounded much farther away.

She looked up and saw the flitting lights far ahead of her, and farther to both the left and right than they had been.

She hurried forward, heedless of her stumbling, and almost ran face first into a cliff. This was obviously the reason the group had split more than intended. She felt her way along the rock wall, going as quickly as she could, but she could hear the shouts getting farther and farther away.

How wide is this fucking rock?!

She was almost running, cracked her knee against a stone and nearly fell again.

When she was finished swearing, she stood still and listened. She couldn't hear the calls at all anymore; only the gentle rustling of the wind through the leaves, the dripping of water from the canopy above, and the faint crunching sound of a body pushing through brush.

Marshall froze as the thing in the trees lumbered closer, crashing through the foliage, cracking branches. Her flashlight swung over the trees and lit up eyes, turned toward her, silvery and blank. Horses. A dozen. Their ears flicked nervously toward her, their nostrils flaring. Marshall kept losing the edges of their bodies against the darkness of the forest.

"Where did you come from?" Marshall whispered.

It was like the moment in church when the priest steps forward, the chatter stops, and the still of the place descends like fog.

One of the horses turned and continued deeper into the forest. The rest of the horses followed, snorting in mild irritation. She watched them go.

They would not go toward danger, she thought. Their instinct would lead them away, but danger was where she needed to go, to be sure that Ros was not there.

She steadied herself against the cliff and turned to continue her slow advance around it. Her flashlight, swinging forward again, settled on a face, paper white and shivering like the leaves around it. A thin line of blood trickled out of her wild hair.

"Emma?"

"Help me."

CHAPTER 44

ROSWELL

Ros thought about the night Phillip was born, how he'd spent the afternoon on the phone with Emma, trying to talk her down, trying to reassure her that they would figure it out, promising to drive her to the city if they needed, find a doctor who could help them even if it was too late.

She was hysterical, telling him that it couldn't be done, that it was too late, that her body felt like it was being shredded already, pulled apart by hooks under her skin. He remembered promising her that if she did *it*, this thing that he only vaguely understood, he would support her. He just wanted to calm her—anything to get her to stop crying and choking and gasping.

He slept. He dreamed of a red beach and an ocean—deep and too warm. The waves broke gently over his legs and then retreated—came again.

The phone rang at three a.m. and he ran to the living room, praying he reached it before his mother. He did and held the receiver against his face so hard it hurt. He could hear Emma sobbing on the other end and felt every word he ever knew leave his body.

"I did it," she gasped. "I did it. It's gone. I did it, Ros. It's gone."

"Where are you? I can come get you!"

"I'm home. I'm home. Leave it alone and it will go away, Ros. Just leave it alone."

He hung up the phone and pulled on his pants, dug the flashlight out from under the sink. He shut the door so gently it wouldn't have woken a ghost. Then he ran, his tennis shoes crunching across the gravel. He could hear the horses before he even opened the barn door.

There was blood, but not as much blood as he thought. The baby came easier than a foal, and began to cry immediately. He'd helped deliver foals

before, and it was calming to do the same thing now.

The fear stepped out of the room for a moment, then returned to kick him in the chest as he held the wrinkled infant and it turned its bloody face to him and screamed and screamed.

Rosie went on with her life, as if nothing had happened. Ros wrapped Phillip in his shirt and wondered how—how in God’s name—he was going to explain this to his mother, but when she walked into the stall, looked at her son and grandson crying in the bloody straw, she didn’t seem surprised. She only looked deeply, deeply sad.

“Mama,” Ros had said, holding the baby up to her as if he were an offering.

The disappointment didn’t leave her face, but she took Phillip and bounced him gently, rocking him, whispering *shh shh shh*.

When she finally said something, it was, “Well, he’ll get milk and sugar on his grave one day. Let’s go inside and break some eggs.”

Ros wished his mother was with him now as he held Phillip to his chest, stumbling through a world of cold and wet and black and white. Emma was gone. She’d panicked and tried to run back to the barn, and he’d tried to follow. Then he couldn’t hear her voice and then he couldn’t hear her footsteps and then he was alone with his son in the woods, like a minnow lost in the sea.

He could only see ten feet in front of him, at best. The fog moved in gray eddies, flowing and ebbing and changing directions—tide pools in the forest. The world seemed to pulse with the movement, as if he was inside a massive vein. He didn’t know where they were going, only that they needed to go, go, go. He was following some instinct inside him, hoping desperately that it would lead them to safety.

Phillip made warning noises of an impending meltdown. Ros stroked his son’s face and whispered *shh shh shh*. He couldn’t hear if the monster was coming. If his grandfather was coming. He couldn’t hear anything over the sound of their feet crushing the leaves and sticks and bones of the forest.

They came to a rock wall in the darkness, the quick ascension of limestone and flint that was so common, beautiful in the day and dangerous

at night. The glaciers hadn't made it this far south—had not flattened away the sharp parts of the world.

He tried to work his way around the cliff, but it was a never-ending wall, continuing into the white fog as far as he could see. Could he hear the monster coming? He felt like his brain was screaming, pushing him farther and faster and deeper into the dark forest.

“We'll climb. I can do it,” he whispered.

He crushed Phillip against his chest with one hand and clutched stone with the other, pulling himself up the crags, feeling the sticks and pine needles and sharp stones dig and cut into his skin. He wondered what might be living under the leaves, what might lash out and bite him. He'd seen copperheads in these woods, mottled like autumn leaves, lethal heads tilted skyward. *Stargazing*, they called it.

No teeth found his skin.

He pulled himself over the top and there it was, the bones of the home his family still told stories about. It rose from the fog like a sea monster. A curtain fluttered out of one of the windows, white against the brick.

It called to him. He bent toward it, the magnet at the center of the world. If any place had the power to resist a monster, it was here.

Phillip began to cry.

CHAPTER 45

MARSHALL

Emma didn't want to be touched, but there was no other way to help her through the underbrush. Marshall didn't know if she kept flinching from pain or from the very presence of someone else's hands and body.

Of course, they might also have a murderer stalking them.

Or a monster.

"Wish I had some sage," she murmured to no one.

"You couldn't do the whole forest," Emma said, seriously. "I should have just jumped off the overpass."

"Absolutely not," Marshall said, and then her mind went blank, because yes. It would be so much easier to jump off an overpass, and she had thought this same thing most days. She would not tell this girl that she was wrong, though that was not the whole point.

She needed good words for this girl. Marshall was supposed to be good at words, but she found herself failing time and time again in Raeford. Maybe the place was infecting her—the weird silence, the slippery memory, the careful and selective turning away. The birds on the barbed wire.

"You made the best decision you could at the time. That's all any of us can ever do."

"I should have just handled it. I shouldn't have told Ros."

"Knowing things isn't a poison. We shouldn't have to do these things alone. It's not fair."

I should have told Joseph, but I'm relieved I didn't.

"It's not fair," Emma echoed. "I was so angry and so afraid."

"Of course you were."

Marshall saw light, like dancing fairies through the leaves, and Emma sagged on her shoulder. She hauled her up and yelled—once, twice, three

times. Finally, the voices rose and came toward her and there were other flashlights, other hands. The weight was lighter, and they stumbled out of the forest in a crowd of excitement.

The yard was emptier now. Marshall supposed most people were making their way through the woods. Those who were left had specific jobs—warm drink stirrer, small child wrangler, radio manager. It was mostly women. The few male officers had retreated to lean on their cars in the driveway.

Marshall saw Agatha was in a semicircle of people, a water bottle clutched so tightly in her fist that she could hear the crackling. She came forward, a charging bull, a wave.

“Emma! Are you all right? Where are the boys?”

Emma responded by instantly bursting into tears and nearly collapsing.

“Emma, you have to tell me.”

“I don’t know! I don’t know!”

“Fuck it! I’m going back in!” Agatha was already stomping toward the tree line.

“Buddy system!” someone yelled at her.

“I’ll go,” Marshall said, before her brain could check her.

Before someone lifted the girl off her shoulder, Marshall whispered, “Just keep going.”

She squeezed Emma’s shoulder and the girl looked up at her with wide eyes. She was already being surrounded by women and girls, a cup of something steaming pressed into her hand, a blanket put over her shoulders.

Just keep going, the girl mouthed back.

She’s where she should be, Marshall thought as she hurried after Agatha, as she dove into the darkness again.

CHAPTER 46

EMMA

She couldn't stop crying. She wanted to, but her brain or her body or whatever part of her that could act without her permission was fully in charge, and it wasn't done shaking and sobbing and being unable to stand.

The women moved around her, handing her things, giving her simple instructions like *sip* and *give me your hand* and *wipe your eyes on this*. She knew some of them, but many were strangers, or mostly strangers. Their warmth seemed genuine.

She felt fractured. How many of her were there? There was the potential mother, the child who circled all the My Little Ponies in the Christmas toy catalog and received none of them, the girl who could stock the tampon section faster than anyone and pretended she didn't glow under the praise for that. She was the girl crying. She was the young woman trying to stop crying.

Now they came together around her again, a closed circle, a copse of women, shading her, trapping her, protecting her.

"Emma, we're going to ask you some questions now."

Who was talking to her?

"Okay."

"You didn't pay the price, did you? You didn't do a sacrifice?"

"No," she wailed. "I couldn't do it!"

"I understand. I understand. Deep breath. Big deep breath. Now listen, this is important. We can still fix this."

"I want to!"

"Of course you do, sweetie." A different voice, younger. Cracked with a hundred cigarettes.

“You tell me who you hate. Who, in your heart? Who made you cry like this? Who will make it better if they are gone?”

“Not Ros! It’s not Ros! Ros is a good boy! Please don’t make me hurt him!”

Hands on her cheeks. A face before hers she could not see through the fog of her tears.

“Of course not, dear. Of course not. We’re here to help Ros, and help you.”

Another voice, older, a woman who wore a white hat to church and clucked her tongue.

“We can set it right. Who hurt you? Whom do you blame? The first name you think. Your heart will not lie.”

A little plate with a Scottie dog on it. Blood on Jake’s coat. Terror in Ros’s eyes.

“Daily,” she said.

A noise rose up from the women around her, something like a cheer, but also the frustrated sigh of a mother trying to put shoes on her toddler.

“Okay, dear,” the voice said again. “We’re going to talk about what to do next.”

Emma blinked desperately and the face in front of her finally wiggled into view. She didn’t know the woman well, but she worked at the diner, and she was smiling at her with such warmth that Emma smiled back, an echo she could not control any more than she could the crying or shaking. They were talking on the phone. They were nodding. Someone was rubbing her back.

Carter. That was her name.

She was aware that she was losing control of something, that decisions were being made about her life and her future that she was not part of.

How many of her were there?

The her that said, *Run before you lose control.*

The her that was grateful, that was tired of making decisions and muddling her way through. She wanted them to carry her along. She wanted

someone else to take control. And they were. She could hear them discussing her future.

“Someone call Lola. Have her meet us there.”

“Take two cars. Here, take my keys.”

“I have to go home and put Stella to bed.”

“That’s fine, love. Thank you for coming. Thank your mother.”

“Okay, dear, it’s time to go.”

“Go where?” Emma asked.

“Where you’re needed.”

CHAPTER 47

JASON

He was leaning back in his seat, his eyes closed, waiting for a decision to come to him, when the two cars drove up. He tried not to move, froze like a prey animal blending in with his environment. Ten women got out, met in a group on the sidewalk for a minute, and then walked toward Daily's house, opened the door, and disappeared.

Jason's heart was racing. He had a disorienting moment trying to nail down *why*. They'd just walked in. They were just women he knew, mothers and girl scout leaders and PTA members. They were just going into a house.

He put his hand on the door and another on the gun in his pocket.

What was he planning to do, exactly?

Run in and yell *Freeze*?

No, he would wait. He would wait and see.

They appeared again, all ten of them, and in the center of their group was Daily. His hair was sticking straight up and he was wearing only a T-shirt and sweatpants, hunched against the autumn cold. His eyes darted around even as he moved with the group peacefully. He dove to the right and two women blocked his path, grabbed his shoulder, the rest of them collapsing on him, pulled him onward, stumbling, until he put his hands up and said something that must have been *Okay okay okay*.

He looked old for the first time Jason could remember. No, he'd always been old, in the way the cliffs and trees had been old. They were there before he was born and would be there long after he was gone, or so it seemed. Now he looked fragile, and Jason suddenly realized that it would all be gone one day—that change was not only possible but inevitable, and that it would begin today. The women were stronger than him.

And he was terrified.

Daily spotted Jason's car and locked eyes with the young man inside. He opened his mouth, maybe to call for help, and then closed it again, looked away, allowed one of the younger women to hold the door open for him as he climbed inside a tan sedan with a rusted bumper.

They pulled away and Jason followed.

He wasn't subtle, and they must have seen him, but they didn't seem to mind. They simply drove through the empty town, stopping at stop signs and red lights. Unrushed.

He pulled into the church parking lot and watched them continue toward the tree, drumming on his steering wheel. What should he do? He should go. He should stop...whatever it was that was happening.

You know what is happening.

True, but if he didn't say it, even out loud in his head, it wasn't really real. If he could just live in this dishonesty, this doubt, he would be safe forever.

Another car pulled into the parking lot.

Carter got out, her round belly preceding her like a banner. She waddled up to his window. There was a teddy bear on her sweatshirt.

Reluctantly, he rolled down the window.

"You got a gun?"

"What are you doing? What's going on?"

"We're fixing it. Do you have a gun, Jason?"

"What's going to happen?"

She lifted her palm and held it before him—callused, unwavering. It looked like a hand that should hold the gun. It felt like it all fit together. That's why he took it, wasn't it? That's why he went to Daily's. That's why he waited. That's why he followed. It was to be here for Carter, to give her what she needed.

It wasn't his fault.

He was only fulfilling his purpose.

"It's self-defense," she said.

"Sure."

He put the gun in her hand and she left.

It was done now.

It was over.

He breathed a deep sigh that did not touch his racing heart and watched as the side door to the church flung open and Father Brown emerged, striding across the churchyard looking angry.

Jason was out of the car, walking toward him before he knew what he was going to say, then talking before he knew what he was going to say. The man's shocked, pale face drove so much hatred into his heart, like a poisoned spike, that he no longer carried it. He would be carried along by it. He would go limp and let the hatred carry him wherever it pleased. It was joy to lose control, to feel and say the words that went naturally with those feelings.

It was holy.

"You get the fuck back in there."

"Jason, what the hell are—"

"You hid in there when they brought Aaron, didn't you? You sat inside and listened to him scream."

"I absolutely do not know."

"You know. Oh, you know a lot. You know all the sins confessed to me from the drunk back seat of my cruiser and the front porches at three a.m. and at the fucking hospital bleeding out, and what do you do about it? Huh?"

"I don't know what you expect me to—"

"But now you're involved? Now you want to be involved?"

The priest shrugged and opened his mouth like a beached fish.

"You can go hide now. I'm waiting here. Go. Do whatever it is you do. Go pray if you want."

CHAPTER 48

EMMA

They got out at the tree with the rushed insistence of room mothers on a field trip. Someone always had a hand on Emma, not in a threatening way, but like you might with a dog that had slipped its collar. She had no doubt there was no escaping them.

Her body was screaming. It ached on a good day, but the running and fear and tripping and falling had turned her joints to something like Jell-O mixed with glass. She felt like she might crumble at any moment and freeze solid—a monument to pain.

“Is everything ready?” an old woman asked.

“Should be. They got here before us,” a woman with too-blond hair answered.

“Okay, let’s go. Steady, Em. You’re almost done. Just a little longer.”

She took the woman’s offered hand, like a little girl. The woman squeezed it and Emma smiled before she could stop herself.

It suddenly occurred to her that her mother was maybe—probably—nearby. No, she wouldn’t be. She never believed in these things, holding the superstitions at a disdainful arm’s length. They would not have invited her.

Perhaps sensing her tension, the woman squeezed her hand again, and Emma let her lead them into the forest.

When she’d come the night she gave up the baby, she’d been alone. She’d stolen the sedan and parked it farther down the road than she’d probably needed to, and the walk had made her unsteady, her joints whining and her stomach pulling against her skin like she’d swallowed an anchor. By the time she’d reached the tree she was exhausted and dizzy. She’d thrown up in the ditch and cut up her hands and legs fumbling through the brush. She’d cried a lot, and when the thing came out of the trees she wasn’t

sure if it was real, but it smelled so strongly it was like someone was holding a clump of dirty moss over her nose and mouth.

And when it had left she'd thought it was all over.

But tonight they'd cleared the way for her. She didn't have to stumble or catch her naked palm on trees. The women had broken the branches that would have tangled in her hair, and the underbrush had been stomped flat by the footsteps of those who went before her.

The woman did not let go of her hand.

The circle was lit with candles and the symbols were already drawn. Some of the women were singing quietly, part of the ritual that belonged only to them. Carter smiled at Emma and took her other hand.

John Daily was tied to the tree.

There were scratches on his face and a thin smear of blood covered his forehead. His eyes were wide and there was tape over his mouth.

"Come here, Emma. It's going to be okay," Carter said, and Emma realized she'd taken a step backward.

The two women behind her moved forward and she could feel their bodies near her own, like a wall at her back.

They stepped forward. She stepped forward.

She was in the circle now, and the woman holding her hand brought it up, opened her fingers, and Carter set a gun in it like a gift.

Daily screamed, a desperate, muffled sound, and strained against the ropes like a wild mustang.

Emma dropped the gun.

Her hands were shaking.

Daily started crying, tears sliding down the wrinkles on his face.

Someone retrieved the gun and handed it back to her, but did not take her hand away. The woman's nails were hot pink. My Little Pony pink. Another hand joined that one, gnarled, with a battered gold band. Another and another. Carter's hand was on her face. Emma felt a hand on her back and another on her elbow. Two found the back of her head. More and more, they coalesced around her until she felt that she was no longer Emma, but

the face of a monster, a massive creature of pain and vengeance and rage and grief.

The hands turned her toward Daily. The hands lifted her arms with such gentleness, it was almost soothing.

“My little boy, Daily,” someone behind her whispered.

“My girls.”

“Aaron.”

“My husband.”

“Luis.”

“Jake.”

“Me.”

Emma could help them. Emma could save them. She had the power of all of it, the tree, the river, the hooves, the sky, the blood, the womb, the gallop, the dirt, the birthing, the dying.

She held the trigger tighter tighter tighter until it had nowhere else to go.

CHAPTER 49

MARSHALL

The dark was becoming familiar, if not inviting. She'd walked a long time now, but she felt like she was getting close to something. Her eyes were beginning to adjust too, enough that she could make out shapes in the gloom. The mist was thick. She felt like she was swimming in it—diving deeper and deeper and deeper into the rustling sea.

A steep, narrow slope appeared in front of them, its rocks exposed and slick with moss. They worked their way around it, stumbling over piles of limestone that had tumbled from the cliff long ago and become grown over with wet underbrush and tree roots. Finally they came to a clearing and a wide, muddy path. Without warning, Agatha wobbled and fell beside her. Marshall bent to ask her what the hell happened when she felt a chill go through her bones.

She froze, feeling the sick fear turn sour in her stomach.

She thought of the crying in the walls, the body in the road, the blood on the leaves.

“Agatha, we have to go.”

“Can’t you feel it? How are you standing?”

Agatha said something else, but Marshall couldn’t hear, so she knelt beside her. The woman was clutching her arms and looking up the hill with wide eyes. Marshall looked up the hill too and saw Ros’s house—the curtains hanging listless and white in the black cavities of the windows. Standing before those gray walls was a creature of slithering, swarming darkness. It walked with hunched slowness, hunting, sniffing the air with a broken, sharp face.

Marshall reached for Agatha and found the horsewoman’s hands reaching back. The two grown women clutched each other in the midnight-

black forest like little girls frightened at a sleepover.

A baby cry, as alien a noise in the nightmare dark as Marshall could imagine, rose from the house. The monster raised its head and sniffed. The air pulled into the jagged lines of its face made a noise like a puffing steam engine. It took a step forward, its hoof falling on the ground like a dropped cinderblock.

“No!” Agatha yelled.

It turned. It looked at them. It looked through them. It looked between all the parts of Marshall and Agatha like a comb through hair, and they became a million shimmering threads.

They tangled. They blew away. They fell.

Joseph held her hand and cried that he didn’t want to go and she loved him so much it could tear the sun from the sky but it wasn’t enough to save him. She stepped around a dark tree and saw the twisted body of a man she knew—a man she had smoked with, had liked, had hoped for.

She was standing in the hospital, white and clean and empty, tree branches growing through the cracked walls and damp green moss on the floors. She didn’t know at what point her husband stopped being there and started being an object, but there must have been a moment. There must have been a door that he went through, a curtain that separated them. He was there and then he was not.

“Who has wronged you? Whom is it that you hate?” a voice said, and it was powerful, full of righteous fury and authority, but calm too, reassuring.

Marshall was crying. “No one,” she said.

The gray light lay across Joseph’s hands. She still had his plaid shirts, hung perfectly ironed in the closet. He never let her iron them because she got impatient and didn’t do it correctly.

She put a hand against her stomach. This would leave her too.

“Tell me, so I can destroy them,” the voice said again, heavy as a hand on her shoulder. “I will trade your grief for theirs.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Why? I am anger and vengeance. Why does a horse run? Why does a river flow. It is what I am made of.”

Marshall swallowed, and for a moment thought of everyone who had hurt her—thrown rocks, glares, apartment applications that went missing, hands that found her body on the train, in the stockroom, under a desk, the thrown punch at a bar, the spit words, the silence of the beloved. Then she thought of the true villains she'd met, interviewed, seen locked away or walking free. She remembered driving past their houses long after the story was over, wondering, wondering, if they were still chipping away at people's lives.

She thought of John Daily. She thought of Jake. She thought of Ros, a sweet boy who coerced Emma nonetheless. She thought of blood in the ritual circle, of cries in the night, of a forest who felt layers of pain, of women's and girls' pain, crying and bleeding and burying sins in its leaves. Of dying—of being made into a door and then broken to pieces. She felt that pain sink down, down, down, metastasize, gestate, *become*.

And here it was, a gift—that it could be her weapon. It would be so easy, the easiest thing in the world, to direct this thing at anyone she wanted. It would be like a mobile over a crib, and she could send it spinning in a new direction.

She swallowed the thought like a precious jewel she was hiding from a thief. It wouldn't solve anything, not a thing. It would only be a new wound in the world. She saw the fruits of the monster's labors, how it might smash a hole in the bottom of a boat to extinguish a cabin fire.

"No one," she said. "Sometimes terrible things happen."

"No. There is always a price."

Her throat felt vaguely to the left of her eyes, near her fingertips. It didn't hurt, exactly, but the pressure of it, like being crushed under a mountain, was worse somehow. At the cracking edge of her self-control, her mind reached for a name—someone, anyone, to blame.

"The boy, then. He is here. He has hurt her," the monster suggested.

"No!" Agatha screamed.

Then Agatha stood before Marshall's eyes—wherever they were. Agatha stood and looked at the thing and that *No* rushed through the forest like a rising flood.

Across town—in her mind—in the forest and in the sky and deep down to the bottom of the Narrow Bone River—a single gunshot rang deep and loud.

All at once Marshall was together, in one piece, gasping for air on her hands and knees in the mud. Agatha was beside her, holding her shirtsleeve to her nose, which was bleeding freely into the leaves.

“Marshall, are you—”

“Go!” she croaked, and coughed something thick and wet onto the leaves.

The horsewoman ran up the hill, stumbling and screaming her son’s name. The monster was gone, or at least no longer there, and the moon glinted through the leaves innocently, as if it had been there all along.

Marshall dragged herself to her feet and stumbled into the broken house.

She found them, mother, son, grandson, folded together under the rotted ruins of the staircase. Ros and Agatha cried, and Phillip cried, a good baby, who knew when it was time for crying.

CHAPTER 50

EMMA

They put her in a taxi by the church. Someone stuffed a handful of bills into her fist and several of them hugged her. Most of them were crying, holding each other, but Emma watched them as if they were a movie she'd long grown bored of.

Let's just get to the end. Let's just move on.

She did not want to think about the body. She did not want to think about the tree, how Daily's coat bulged and then tore and a thin, sharp branch grew outward from his chest, like a wooden sword through his heart, the blood oozing around it. She did not want to think of the creature with teeth like a wolf and the gullet of a snake who came to feed on the slumped body as the women half carried her out of the forest. She looked back even as they whispered over and over, *Do not look back. Do not look back.* She could hear the tearing and the chewing all the way to the road.

Finally, Carter closed the door and the taxi took off toward the city. The driver tried to chat a few times, and then gave up.

Emma took the time to look at her hands, her pants, her shoes, but she didn't see any blood. She should feel guilty and anxious, but instead she just felt sick and tired. She felt so tired she could fall asleep in the car, but she didn't trust the driver to take her home.

"Look at that!" the driver yelled, and pointed to a dark patch of forest at the side of the road.

"I don't see anything," Emma said.

"It was a horse! A huge horse! It just ran right by there! Do you think we should call someone? The police or someone?"

"Don't bother. I'm sure everyone already knows."

Trudging up the stairs to her apartment, she finally checked her phone and saw a message from Ros, just a heart alone in a field of white.

The other message was a voice memo from her boss. She pressed *Play*. At the same time, she spotted a crumpled bag on the chipped gray paint of the landing, half leaning against her door.

“Hello, Emma. I know you said you were sick so I left you some soup on the stairs. Here also is your first paycheck, a little early. I know young girls have trouble sometimes. Please tell me if you can come in on Sunday. You are a good girl.”

A little early.

A little early was enough.

A little early meant she could stay.

And she felt no guilt with the relief.

ONE YEAR LATER

CHAPTER 51

MARSHALL

Marshall stopped at the grocery store on the way home, even though it was packed that time of day, even though it meant dealing with a mass of people, of crying children, of angry fathers and exhausted mothers. The holiday weekend especially made the chore harder than it needed to be. She kicked herself for not doing it sooner, for not planning ahead, but she reminded herself that she was doing better, and better was all she could do. She remembered what kind of dressing Carter liked, for instance. She got chocolate for Ros. The whole bunch of them had decided to try the holiday together, just to see how that felt, to pretend to be a family.

Jason had been invited, but declined. *Had plans*, he said, but she didn't believe him and wouldn't let him off the phone until he had promised to at least see her for coffee the next day. She'd looked for Lola, but Thomas said she'd left soon after the night John Daily disappeared. *Maybe they ran away together*, he'd said with a hearty laugh. Marshall still needed to text Emma and see if she wanted to come. She knew the answer would be *no*, but one day it might be *yes*, so she would keep trying.

She'd abandoned the story, or the stories, or whatever. Carlos just seemed happy to have her home, and since she seemed sane enough, he didn't ask. Sometimes, though, she caught him staring at her from his desk with a look on his face she recognized.

Trying to figure her out.

Good luck.

By the time she was on the road for Raeford it was already dark. She passed the vacationers going the other way, thousands of them. No one went to Raeford for holidays. When she reached the edge of what she would comfortably call *the city* she was alone on the road. She slowed and

pulled over, leaning over the groceries, trying to see the on-ramp going in the other direction.

There they were, six or eight black horses, standing at the zenith of the upgrade, black against the dark blue of the sky, the halo of the city lights. They looked down at her, flicking their ears, swishing their tails.

She'd never be rid of them, she knew. She'd come in contact with something born from the untouchable, and it would never entirely leave her. She felt fine about it. It, like grief, had become a chronic illness. It would never entirely go away, but it could be endured, cared for, and sometimes relieved.

She pulled back onto the highway and the horses watched her go.

CHAPTER 52

THE WOMEN

They could see the church from their car, the flickering light a sign of drudgery instead of sanctuary. They'd watched Father Brown fill the silver bowls and light the candles and hang purple for Easter, but he never came to the woods at night. He never went to Agatha Bently's house after her father's disappearance. He didn't stop by the jail or check to see if the men under the bridge had eaten that day.

The women did. They cooked casseroles and left them on the Bentlys' porch. They traded nights in front of the gnarled tree. On this particular night, they bent over a cell phone and cooed at pictures of Carter's daughter attempting to eat a teddy bear, drinking a bottle, drooling on Ros's shoulder.

One of them spotted a light, a glimmer in the leaves, and the three of them got out. One of them knocked a macaroni necklace into the leaf litter, retrieved it, and put it safely in the cup holder of the car seat.

They walked softly into the forest. They didn't want to frighten anyone.

"Hello?" one said softly at the edge of the circle.

There was a gasp, and a scramble, and the flashlight was full in her face and it was hard to see anything except light.

"We know why you're here and we want to help."

The flashlight wobbled and they got a quick impression of two girls' faces, their eyes wide and their mouths hanging open.

"How did you know?"

"We weren't going to—"

"We're not going to stop you or anything, but we can talk about options. Yeah? Can we just talk about it?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?" the other girl said. She paused before the word *fuck* as if she was slightly afraid of saying it out loud.

“I can drive you to the clinic or we can talk about what he did to you or whatever you want. It’s whatever you want.”

And then they waited in the circle of light for whatever the girls decided. It didn’t matter, really. They were there. They would stay.

CHAPTER 53

THE HORSES

In the dark it waited, under the leaves, in between the bark and heartwood. It stirred when the wind blew and delighted when the cold rains fell. After midnight, when it was darkest, it rolled across the town like a fog and walked among the horses. Its heart was always glad and always hungry, both in equal measure, both a part of each other, feeding each other, loving each other, making their home in this thing, whatever it was.

It wasn't real yet, for now. It was happiest when it wasn't real, free to do as it pleased or do nothing at all for decades at a time, but it would be back. It would always be back. There were furious hearts who needed it, who fed it with their anger and their righteousness. The little town would never be rid of it. They kept it safe like a secret, and like a secret it broke free.

And the horses needed it in a more pleasant way. It was like their old sheepdog, their familiar pasture. It was old and theirs and, like everything in their lives, never really belonged to them. They watched it with their dark eyes, with their ears, with the whiskers on their faces, and knew at once all the truth there was to know about it and were never bothered by it. It could not save them from broken ankles, or colic, or foundering, or wild dogs, or careless hunters. No, it could only soothe their galloping hearts. Its presence in them felt like a sound they knew once, a hush that came and went, that rocked their bodies, that tugged their manes. *Shhh. Shhh. Shhh.*

It smelled and tasted like the dark and heartless sea they had never seen except once, in a shimmering moment before they were born, and thankfully no one remembers something so terrible.

THE END

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