The Great Beyond Act I: Jackson
by ElsieGlass

Summary

My name is Ellie Williams, and my story begins and ends with one man. The details of the ending are written on a bounty and blame him. The thief of the world. That night, the world died another death.

But what about that man? His name is Joel Miller. There’s not a single drop of his blood in my veins and he’s got no more claim to me than anyone else but he’s taken the place of a father in my heart.

I’ve changed a lot since that night. A man lied to me but kept his oath to himself. He did good by doing bad. I’m a better person for it and I learned the truth about so many things.
I wrote a fan fic. These are words I never thought I’d say in my whole life. Well, I did it. I wrote a ~300k-word fan fic based on The Last of Us video game (2013) by the game development studio, Naughty Dog, a Bruce Straley/Neil Druckmann joint.

After news broke in 2014 about TLOU being optioned for film, I bought a console, played it, and loved it. I was an American living in the EU and homesick for my native landscapes, and TLOU was pure escapism. My fic took five years to write, on-and-off, sometimes with year-long breaks. I’ll be dropping two chapters a day from January 1, 2020 through February 21, 2020.

The Great Beyond is organized into three acts: Jackson, Big Drift, and Places Unknown, respectively. Act I begins in Jackson, Wyoming, one month after the video game ends. Act II and III follow sequentially. The work is told through the first person perspective of Ellie Williams. It uses vertical storytelling with a couple fantasies and dreams thrown into each act, which become more obscene and brutal as they progress.

My work mashes-up various genres—dystopian, post-apocalyptic, survival, naturalism, old west, obscenity, and chick lit. The work stands-up well for those not familiar with the canon. Brutalism and libertinism are overarching themes. Graphic obscenity, explicit situations, and unflinching violence runs throughout. Take away the brutalism, and at its core, it’s the story of the courageous triumph of loyalty and love toppling cruelty.

I’m deeply appreciative of a couple special people who inspired me, and helped me along the way, including the TLOU fan fic writers who came before me and who will come after me.

peppermint_smile: this lovely lady introduced me to AO3 a couple years ago when I finished my first draft, and she sent me my first invitation to the site. Her own writing and enthusiasm for AO3 and the whole TLOU fan fic community was truly inspiring.

Scarlet Claws: this wonderful woman demystified the fan fic culture and community to me from A to Z. She guided me through my endless questions about the art of fan fics and everything about AO3.

R_W_Daniels: this generous writer of TLOU long fics inspired me and challenged me to write my own smut.

I support the inalienable right to free expression and the inherent value of copyright. I hope my work encourages and inspires writers everywhere to create and make their own works that greatly enrich their lives and the fan fic culture.

The Great Beyond is a work of fan fiction based on The Last of Us video game (2013) by the game development studio, Naughty Dog, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Sony Interactive Entertainment. Additional names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Happy reading! Xo

You can find Act II here.

You can find Act III here.
Here I am. Exactly where I’ve been for the past four Sundays since Joel and I arrived at Jackson. It’s 20 and 34, the year of grace. Twenty-one years since the Critical. I wasn’t alive but Joel was. He said you really started to understand how messed-up things were when you stopped hearing the sound of barking dogs. I asked him if it was because people were so hungry they had to eat them and he was like, ‘No, Ellie, folks did not eat their dogs,’ in the same exasperated tone of voice he used when I asked him if you could ride a bear like a horse. ‘No, Ellie, you can’t ride a bear like a horse. No, not even if it’s saddled.’ This is different than when he gets in his moods and everything I say annoys him. A red flag to an angry bull. Like, if I’m like, ‘It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it, Joel?’ and he’s like, ‘No, Ellie, what we need’s rain.’ Or if I’m like, ‘Thank God it’s Friday, huh, Joel?’ and he’s like, ‘Friday ain’t a holiday, Ellie. It’s a regular day of work and you’ve still got plenty to do.’

So I exhaled one long breath because I was relieved people didn’t eat their dogs. How could you eat your own pet? That doesn’t make any sense. So then he was like, ‘We drowned ’em. We had to. It had to be done.’ This was something he said as a fact. I started to picture this in my head. I always imagined someone big like him had a big mess of dogs in his big house in Texas Territory so I got very quiet. Everyone who knows me knows when I go quiet, that’s something. Joel knows this about me. There’s not a single thought in my head he can’t read plain on my face.

He started to dig around his hair and said dogs got real vicious once they started to starve, which didn’t take long at all. When dogs weren’t attacking folks, they were eating unburied corpses full of disease and infection, which spread more disease and infection. Sanitation was nonexistent. There weren’t enough able-bodied folks to dispose of the dead as fast as they died. I know this should’ve made me upset but it just made me more in awe of dogs.

So like I was saying. Here I am, exactly where I’ve been every Sunday for the past month. Wedged in a pew in the big white church at the downriver Vale, the small valley seeded with frontier shelter. I sit with the other Zetas from the girls’ dorm where I’ve been assigned a bunk in the Dale’s upriver powerhouse, its multi-purpose hall split into dormitories, a mess, an armory, and an infirmary.

Father Crane makes the sign of the cross from behind the altar laid with a child-sized pine coffin. “Children who’ve shed tears of sorrow on earth are reaping joy in Heaven. By Him and with Him, to God, the Father Almighty.”

The congregation mumbles, Amen. I don’t do this. Prayers don’t hold a shred of meaning to me. When I told Joel I didn’t believe in God, he said to mumble at the right times and leave it at that. Religion means one thing to me. Being bored out of my mind on Sunday morning after being
dragged out of a warm bunk and waiting for it to be over so I can enjoy the rest of my day. What am I even doing here? God this, God that. No one can seem to tell me why I have to be here at all. Why do I have to go to church to speak to God? If God’s who they say He is, shouldn’t He already know what I’m thinking? What kind of sins does God suppose I’ve committed and why should I spend my life worrying about it? It’s no way to live your life. I don’t like Sundays. It’s Father Crane’s only real day of work so I suppose he doesn’t like Sundays, either.

Just as I start to think about what I’m going to do with the rest of my day, a hushed murmur settles over the congregation. All eyes turn to Briggs. He rises from the front pew, climbs onto the sanctuary, and stands at the altar. This isn’t something that normally happens at mass for the dead. People don’t do this. No one knows what Briggs is doing. He’s drunk, is what we’re all thinking. His eyes are bloodshot from corn whisky and I suppose crying.

Father Crane backs his well-fed body against the wall. I don’t understand why he’s so fat. No one here starves but there’s just enough food to go around. Briggs nervously tugs his overalls’ suspenders and lays a trembling hand over his daughter’s coffin. Yesterday they carried her lifeless body into the powerhouse, still dripping water from the lake. I saw it. I was there. There was blood coming out of one of her nostrils. I knew she was dead by the way her head was dangling, like a dead rabbit with a broken neck.

“She’s alright,” Briggs says to the room. Some of the congregation flushes, some go pale, some drop their eyes, and some look-on blankly. Me? I look away. I don’t have to look after all. I’ve watched men die, both innocent and deserving. This is a fact. It’s not a decent thing to watch a man’s grief. That’s different.

“She’s dead, Briggs,” a baritone voice says—Joel’s voice—from one of the back pews where he sits with his fellow Deltas from the men’s dorm. Big smelly brawlers who set things straight with good aim and strong fists.

“She’s alright,” Briggs says to the room. “She’s full of life. Of course she ain’t dead.”

“Drowned,” Joel says, his deep voice echoing ominously around the high-pitched roof lined in light wood and crossed in dark beams.

“She’ll get up,” Briggs says. “Now if y’all’ll leave, everything’ll be alright.” He raps gently on the coffin lid and speaks to his daughter like she’s in there taking a little nap. “Baby, get up. Get up, now. Time to get up.” He glances around the room. “Now if y’all’ll go, it’ll be alright.”

Joel strides purposely down the center aisle and stops at the sanctuary edge. “Let her rest, Briggs,” he says. “She ain’t coming back.”

“You ain’t gonna take her away from me,” Briggs says, his manner belligerent.

“We’ll say a prayer and bury her in holy ground, cover her grave with ashes.”

“She ain’t gonna be put in that graveyard! Not in that ugly box!”

“Let her go, Briggs,” Joel says. “Let her rest.”

With a strangled cry, Briggs lunges toward a large maple cross nailed to the wall. He rips it from its moorings, swings it past his shoulder, and smashes it against the coffin. Splinters ricochet the altar. A dark chunk flies out of a hole in the side of the coffin and lands on the ground with a soft plop. My blood chills. What is that? Is that…moss? Right, it’s moss. They line the coffins in moss. Joel bounds onto the sanctuary and wrenches the cross from Briggs’ hands. Shouting gesticulating
Deltas stream the aisle and pin Briggs to the floor as he wails lament, choking on hoarse dry sobs. I don’t like the sound of these sobs. That ungodly sound when a man’s tears have all been shed but grief kicks him in the heart. This sound comes from nowhere good.

The congregation rises and shuffles toward the doors. No one says a word. I’ve been to a couple of these things, and it’s something these people normally enjoy and get cleaned-up for. Death’s so commonplace, and life’s so boring and uneventful, things like fights, weddings, and funerals are welcomed events.

No one says a word or even glances back as they file past. I know what it looks like. What kind of person could just walk away without offering a warm handshake or a comforting pat on the back? If they were anyone decent, they’d say something like, ‘I’m sorry for your loss. If there’s anything I can do to help, please don’t hesitate to ask.’ No one does this. The fact is, if you let your heart break over everyone’s despair, you’d never survive a single day. Could you imagine how worn-out you’d get if you cried over everyone who died, even if they meant nothing to you? What more can be done? I wouldn’t be able to do anything anyway. I can’t pretend what I don’t feel. I’d be of no use to him.

Outside the church, Deltas throw on their baseball caps, and fiddle with their rigging and load-out. They spark corn-husk cigarettes and draw the blue smoke greedily into their lungs like they haven’t smoked in years. They stand around smoking, spitting, laughing, and calling-out to other passing Deltas. Zetas clique-up and chat in unguarded voices, waiting for their friends. Yes, I’m a Zeta. No, I don’t mix. I was brought up to be practical and useful, and that’s how I expect others to be. I start making my way down the stairs. I pass Ashley, and her brother and fiancé, Burke. That’s right. Brother and fiancé. Siblings who fuck. Siblings aren’t supposed to fuck each other. Nobody does this. Nobody but sick fucking weirdos, that’s who. What the hell’s wrong with people?

Whenever anyone mentions this, Burke says something like, ‘Look at her, bro, she’s fine as fuck,’ as if it excuses everything. She’s 17 and he’s 25. No denying they’re from the same bloodline. You can see it plainly with your own eyes. They’re both fair and tall with the same broad shoulders, and piggish noses and eyes. Out of all the people left in the world, they want to shoot their shot with their own family. Judgement aside, nobody fucks their own blood. Inbreeding and incest are anathema. Birth defects, you know. I’ve hated these two since I got here. Even if they were like normal people who didn’t fuck their own blood, I’d still hate them and it’s mutual.

“Hey, Tex’s Girl!” Ashley yells at me as I pass. “Jesus ain’t gonna save you. All ferals go to Hell!”

“So do blood-fuckers!” I yell and give them the finger. My cheeks flush warm in anger. “You fuck your own blood! That’s nasty as fuck!”

“Feral bitch!” Burke yells at me. “You’re dumb as fuck!”

Everyone laughs at this. Can you believe they called me that? A feral! I know damn well they call me much worse behind my back but no one’s ever called me a feral to my face. No one calls me that and gets away with it. If they slander me, they slander Joel. I won’t stand for it. Plenty of people whisper Joel’s my real father, which is why they call me Tex’s Girl. What’s it matter? The fact is, someone who looks like him would never give birth to someone who looks like me. There’s very little resemblance between us. It’s common sense, like if a duck were born from a swan’s egg. Joel’s unforgettable and magnetic. Me? I look like everyone else. If he’s heard the rumors, I’m sure it bothers him. I suppose no man likes to be rumored about. I suppose they make-up stories about him because he never talks about himself. He never tells anyone about his past and he never bothers clearing-up misunderstandings. Why should he? No one knows anything about him aside from the fact he’s Tommy’s older brother and he came here from the Boston QZ
with me.

So what’s changed? It doesn’t matter. I recognize their hostility and I resent it. There’s been trouble brewing between us since the day I arrived. In every place you go there’s a big loud bully who makes more noise than the others. Some they push around, some they lead, and others tiptoe around them to make peace. At the powerhouse, these two are the loudest and meanest, and that’s saying a lot. Burke’s big and quarrelsome, and quick with a gun. No one really likes him but everyone’s afraid of him. He’s the big chief around the Delta boots.

I don’t care who he is. No person on earth can talk to me like that. He’s twice my size. I can’t defeat him physically—he’s way too big—and my anger can only carry me so far. I know this but I won’t be laughed at in front of everyone. I wait till he looks away, till he’s caught off-guard. I take a running step and shove him backward. His face flashes a look of surprise. He stumbles back a bit and bumps into Ashley. The force sends her tottering back. She makes a little squeal and lands square on her ass. He helps her to her feet and brushes off invisible dirt from her miniskirt. She holds a limp wrist accusingly and glares at me. I didn’t even touch her!

“I ain’t forgetting this!” he yells at me through grit teeth and bitter lips. “I’llma beat seven kinds of hell outta you! You’d better watch your back!”

I make my way down the stairs, steaming anger. These two run me down for no good reason. They spread rumors I’m a feral, like one of those ugly orphaned savages raised wild without guidance. People hate ferals because they roam the wilderness in hoards, gleefully attacking the military. The military retaliates by ambushing the closest towns, looting them, and burning them to the ground. Or they round-up the locals and make them rebuild the bridges, fill-in the potholes, and haul away the trees left by the feral ambush. No one likes ferals because they have no cause other than anarchy and chaos. It’s one thing to be a rebel with a cause but another to destroy without reason. At least have a cause, you know?

So why do they call me that? How should I know? I suppose it’s because I’m an orphan but the world’s full of illegitimate bastards like me. I suppose I should feel sorry for them. Their kids will probably be born with defects. Look, I don’t really care who’s with who. Let them be born, marry and die however they want, and with whomever they want. It means nothing to me. I don’t care what they call me as long as they don’t find out my secret. That’d be the end of everything.

I don’t fit into the stereotypes here and I won’t play along so I have to suffer for it. I won’t conform. I suppose I’m too rebellious and aggressive. No one likes me carrying-on like that, threatening their precarious sense of self. There are strict gender roles here. The Zetas wear make-up and have their childhood dolls stashed away in their lockers. They’re allowed to cry, tell white lies, and cheat a bit to get what they want. The Deltas play with guns and scorn any form of weakness. They’re not allowed to cry and they fight to win. They can’t be tender, sympathetic, or sensitive. They have to be courageous, self-reliant, decisive, and aware at all times. I’m sure they cry. They just make sure no one ever sees or hears them doing it.

I reach the landing and a large hand closes around my arm, yanking me to a halt. Tommy’s hand. “What’s the ruckus?” he asks.

“Lemme go!” I yell and fight against him, still fired-up from the fight.

“Easy,” he says in a warning tone. He steers me past the ogling crowds toward the far edge of the field framed by slender silver birches. I can tell by the set of his muscles and his stony silence I’m in trouble. Bring it on, Tommy, I say to him silently. I can take trouble.

We reach the fringe and he gestures at a felled mossy log. “Go on. Set yourself down.” I sit on it
like a bench and he squares in front of me. His t-shirt’s all bunched-up beneath his chest rig. He must feel it because he tucks it back beneath his rigging.

“Look around, Ellie,” he says. He sweeps his hand lordly around his and his wife Maria’s gated frontier town nestled in the heart of the Rockies carved from the Wyoming Territory wilderness, with gleaming mountain peaks scarred in harsh weather. “We’re a threatened species, under assault. Men without a country. Out there, it’s wild. Easy killing, simple dying. Hell’s half-acre. In here, we reclaim, just like our forefathers with pitchforks and plows, chopping neat little squares outta ‘em forests and cutting big prairies into little farms. Reckon ‘em QZs grade-up? Nothing but noise, disease, ruckus, garbage, and trouble.”

Like Joel, I’m a transplant from the Boston Quarantine Zone overseen by the United States Armed Forces. The government agency, FEDRA, set them up in 20 and 13 when the cordyceps brain infection virus reached critical mass. The Great Rift, the Great Divide, the Great Awakening, the Crack Up, the Dust Up, the Surrender, the Revelation, the Bail Out. Everyone’s got their favorite slang.

We called it the Critical in the overcrowded filthy quad where I was raised, with air so polluted you could taste it. I don’t like the smell of the city. Sewers, and decaying things that were already dead when they were tossed-out into the streets. Blocks of tenements. Cockroaches and bedbugs. Lice and vermin. No warmth in the winter. No light, no heat. People were always scavenging the streets for a little bit of kindling, something to throw into the stoves to heat their quads. There was no fuel to be found but they still foraged for it anyway. The whores wandered the streets trying to score ration cards. There was nowhere to go and nothing to do. You’d think one would get used to it but I never did. The closest I ever came to nature was sitting outside on a bench near a little patch of gravel.

“I’ve been in this here territory a mighty long time,” he says, “and it comes about as close to God’s open country as you can get. There’s good folks here. Big strong men living clean lives, muscles tough from hard work. Some lost their faith but they’re carrying a load of sin. Sin they ain’t responsible for. Bearing it as bravely as they can. Fine feathers don’t make fine birds. Ever seen a plucked peacock? He ain’t pretty.”

Almost everyone at Jackson has been here their whole lives. They don’t want to know or do anything aside from what they already have. They only need to know the basics of reading, writing, and math, and even if they had the opportunity to learn more, they wouldn’t. They need to know how to count, do basic sums, and write their names. How to stay warm in the winter and fed in the summer. The problem is, they want everyone else to be just like them. They want to tell you how to speak, learn, and behave.

Tommy looks at me with cold clear hard eyes. “Joel tells me you’re an atheist. Don’t believe in God.”

“Don’t make me believe in something I don’t understand,” I say. My God wouldn’t let people be wiped-out like they never existed, wouldn’t kill innocent children like Briggs’ daughter or Joel’s daughter, or leave their loved ones behind to suffer their absence. My God wouldn’t let the world look like this, full of decay and disease and famine. If my God saw the terrible things I saw, you’d think He would’ve stepped-in by now. But He hasn’t. So if He exists, He’s not on my side nor the side of good men like Joel.

“If you don’t believe in God,” he says, “you’ve got no aim. You make no headway. A man’s gotta play by the rules if he wants to stay peaceable, yeah?”

“Lemme pray in my own way, to my own God.”
He sniffs contemptuously. “I figured some of my brother’s good sense rubbed-off on you but you’re a stubborn little girl. You don’t fall-in with no one, yeah? Kinda deep and hard to figure out.”
Chapter Two

Tommy sits at my side on the log. He digs around his tawny hair faded to light straw by the wind and sun.

“When we were little,” he says, “our dad took us fishing, every spring. Me and Joel. Matagorda, the Gulf Coast. We’d launch our skiff at six in the morning when it was still dark, and say hi to the pelicans and egrets as the sun came up. We’d pull the skiff from pool to pool, cut the motor, and start poling. Chasing black drum, skip jack, stingrays, and spotted sea trout. Joel’s first cast was every angler’s dream. He stripped the fly in front of a tarpon, a five-footer, and hooked him. The bite was on fire. God is good. Hauling him in felt like hauling-in a whale. We got him into the bottom of the boat and he had to kill his first catch. He wouldn’t do it.

“He never swore and he rarely used his fists. He hated violence but never ran from it. He hated the high life, hated it like poison. Had no liking for that type—drugs, drinking, gambling, fast cars, fast women. Always fought shy of ‘em. Always tried to be just and show mercy, and he could find his way around anything, even if it went against the grain to do so. Can’t say I’ve had the same fortitude but I was born to command. Tend to my flock. Lead ‘em to good pasture, watch over the gate, and strike down the savage wolves who intend to bring ‘em harm.”

He massages his drop-holstered .45 pistol and pulls to his feet with a dismissive grunt. He squares in front of me with his legs asprawl and hooks a thumb into the belt kit slung around his hips. I drop my eyes to his jump boots shot through with broken grass.

“You shouldn’t have picked a fight,” he says, “shouldn’t have shot-off your mouth. Now what are we gonna do about it?”

What do you mean what are we gonna do about it? How about not making me go to church every Sunday morning. That’d be a good start. You’d see what a good girl I could be if you let me sleep-in one day of the week.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you, child,” he says, his voice commanding.

I look at him directly. The first thing Joel told me when we came here last month was to keep my mouth shut and listen to his brother. Joel moved heaven and earth for me. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for him. I’ve killed for him and he’s killed for me. I’ll never forget everything he’s done for me.

“You’ve gotta be disciplined,” he says. “You know that, don’t you?”

I make a nervous little laugh. What’s he talking about, disciplined?

“Wipe that goddamn sneer off your face,” he says.

I bite-back my smile.

“I reckon you’ve got things pretty mixed-up,” he says. “I keep forgetting you haven’t been here that long. You’re not acquainted to living where there’s rule of law. And while we’re talking law, first off, I’m the Justice of the Peace of this here settlement and I take pride in upholding it. I’ve
gotta duty to protect the good folks here and damned if I ain’t gonna do it. Now listen hard, Ellie, ’cause this’ll be news to you. We’ve gotta situation here and I’mma give you a choice. Either a permanent change of station to the Vale with one of ‘em good Christian families or you get the punishment you deserve.”

He can’t be serious. It has to be a bluff. What would he even punish me for? Defending myself against bullies? They ganged-up on me. Two against one. I didn’t even start it.

“Say adios to the Dale or take your punishment,” he says.

“What punishment?” I ask.

“I’mma tan your hide.”

I gasp. A cold sweat breaks-out across my forehead. “You wouldn’t dare!”

“You keep-on thinking that.”

“Wait till Joel finds out.”

He sneers. “Joel spoils you, hasn’t taught you an ounce of respect.”

“You’re crazy if you think you can lay a finger on me,” I say. I can’t sit still so I pull to my feet. What’s it even mean, tan my hide? It doesn’t matter. I know Tommy well enough to know he means business. I barely know him but I know a great deal about him. I’m not supposed to know these things about him but I do. Joel’s told me little things about him here and there, and I’ve heard people talk. I can put it all together.

Corporal punishment’s fair game at Jackson—reliance on Proverbs and its severe disciplines—but I’m sixteen. Way too old to be thrown over a lap and spanked. I cringe even thinking about it. Tommy’s the Justice of the Peace around here. He heads the Vigilance Committee, which oversees all laws, crimes, and the punishment of lawbreakers. We don’t have a jail here. That’d be ridiculous. Could you imagine a jail here? Having no jail means there’s little tolerance for rule-breaking. Tommy’s got full authority to punish me but he’d never get away with it. Joel wouldn’t let him. He’s my sole guardian. No one but him plans my punishment, praise, or instruction. It’s got to be a bluff, an empty threat to keep me in line. If I told someone back in Boston a grown man threatened to spank me, they wouldn’t even believe me. They’d be like, ‘No, sir! That’s wicked frigging queer!’

“Well?” he asks. “What’s it gonna be? My belt or the Vale?”

“I don’t want either,” I say, my voice plaintive.

“I don’t care what you don’t want.”

“Can’t I just apologize?”

“That ain’t gonna cut it. I represent the law and I’mma do my duty.”

The rules out here are pretty simple. The Lord said to Moses don’t kill, don’t steal, and don’t fuck other people’s people. Fear God, love work. No gambling, no fighting, and no excessive drinking. Sometimes Tommy has to take care of the hard-drinking men and it’s not pretty, although it’s always funny to see adults acting like lunatics.

There’s strict law and order here. Work begins an hour before dawn and lasts an hour after dusk.
Men sixteen and older rotate guard duty in two-hour shifts around the clock, chosen rotationally or as punishment. Sentry duty’s at the guardhouses and prowler duty’s on foot, patrolling the perimeters. It’s a tough schedule but lots of men are discharged military and fifth column defectors like Tommy who’re eager to work. There’s a lot to do and never enough time to do it. Some men are carpenters, blacksmiths, cooks, and winemakers, and they’re paid in tobacco, food, and drink. The Vale men with their big families work for the lease of their cabins and small allotments of land to grow supplemental food. That’s all they want from life. It’s that simple.

“Well, what of it?” he sneers.

“They started it,” I say. “They called me a feral!”

“They didn’t mean nothing,” he says, like it excuses everything. “It’s just their way.”

Well, it’s not my way. I didn’t do anything to anybody. Just a little shove, is all. I don’t want to live at the Vale. Why would he send me there? The Vale’s worse than the Dale. I’d never willingly choose to be relocated. They’d blend me into one of those weird religious foster families with a dozen mutinous orphans and feral teenagers too disobedient for the powerhouse dorms. I’d be forced to say grace before every meal and prayers before bed-down at sundown. Bed-down at sundown! Tyrannized by the father-figure reigning as master after God, all of them with long wild beards you swear a raccoon’s going to skitter out and attack you. The kind of family where, ‘Poddon me, please pass the taters,’ is the highlight of the dinner conversation. Even worse, I’d only get to see Joel on Sundays at church. Not a chance in hell.

“Ain’t got no tongue?” he asks.

“How would you do it?” I ask, lacing and unlacing my fingers.

“Meaning?”

“Punishment.”

“Hard, Ellie. I’d do it hard.”

The color drains from my face. He’s watching my reaction with a cold mirthless smile. He’s trying to intimidate me. It’s working. Sometimes Joel loses his temper with me but he’s not violent. Like if I’m dawdling, he’ll be like, ‘Ellie, if you don’t come when I tell you to come I’mma get very angry,’ in a stern commanding voice. So I always nod my head, yes, and do what he asks, which pleases him. He’d never lay a finger on me if I didn’t listen to him. He’s not that type.

“You won’t get away with it,” I say. “You can’t do it.”

He pulls himself up full length, his muscles rigid and the sweep of his jaw stubborn. “I’mma tell you one thing, child, and you best be hearing me. If you don’t make up your mind, I’mma get very angry,” in a stern commanding voice. So I always nod my head, yes, and do what he asks, which pleases him. He’d never lay a finger on me if I didn’t listen to him. He’s not that type.

“You won’t get away with it,” I say. “You can’t do it.”

He pulls himself up full length, his muscles rigid and the sweep of his jaw stubborn. “I’mma tell you one thing, child, and you best be hearing me. If you don’t make up your mind, I’mma make things mighty unpleasant for you.”


“And what do you want me to punish you with?” he asks with a cold derisive smile, his eyes glittering malice.

“Your belt?”

“That’s right,” he says. “I’mma give you a taste of my belt. And where do you want me to belt
you?”

I don’t respond, mortified. He wants to hear me say it, wants to hear me say, ‘Tommy, I want you to belt my ass.’ This pleases him. He’s enjoying every second of this. What kind of man enjoys this? Not a decent man, that’s for sure.

“Spit it out!” he yells.


“Twelve lashes over your underwear,” he says. He swings his shotgun from his shoulder and slings it low in his hand. “Can’t say you didn’t have it coming. Disobedience deserves punishment.”
“Gotta know when to keep your head above water and when to put it under,” Joel says behind my back.

Frigid water laps my shoulders and sucks the rocky shore. The Great Lake reservoir runs high after the late spring thaw. High June sun glimmers the water. Balmy air fans sweet and soft.

Our first swimming lesson. After Briggs’ daughter drowned last week, Joel’s revisited his promise to teach me how to swim. I never learned how to keep myself in the water. There was no one to show me my whole life. Joel knows what it was like in Boston. No one bothered to learn to swim. Why bother learning, they said. Even if you could get past the military and the patrolling warships, it’s not like you could escape anywhere in the Atlantic. What would you do, swim to England? Go have tea with the Queen? Gleaming silver tea service, spotless white linen, and dainty china teacups? You can’t even see anything from the shore if you bothered to look. The water’s way too cold. How far could you really swim? If you knew how to swim, it’d just take you longer to drown, they joked. Plenty tried to escape in makeshift rafts. They were blown out of the water by the warships patrolling the harbors and bays.

I like the water well enough but I don’t like living so close to the river, nor the sound of it coursing over the dam’s spillway bays. I suppose for some, the sound of rushing water over rocks is soothing but it dulls my hearing, makes me feel like I’m going to be caught unawares. I’m used to keeping all my senses alert. I’m sure Joel feels it, too, like it’s only a matter of time till we’re deceived by the river.

“Is this how you taught Sarah?” I ask him.

“ Took to it like a fish,” he says. “If you intend to survive a fall from a high place, you’ve gotta get used to the heights.” He takes me by the waist, leads me onto my back, and slips the flat of his palms beneath my shoulders, holding me up. “Shoulders back. Stick out your chest. Chin up.”

I do what he says and look up. A vigilant hawk silently glides across the sky.

“All animals know how to swim instinctively, except man,” he says. “Know why?”

“Why?” I ask.

“Fear. Animals don’t have time for knowing about ‘em things. Don’t get to panicking. Struggle ‘em muscles and you’ll sink like a stone. The body doesn’t need much movement to keep it from sinking. Any real motion with your hands or feet will keep your head above water. That’s all there is to it.”

“That’s all?”

“Ain’t it enough?”

He pulls away his hands and I feel myself floating. Floating! The lake feels tiny compared to the Atlantic Ocean. How could anyone drown in this? I think of Briggs’ daughter. I think of how terrible it must’ve been to open your mouth to scream and have it fill with water until you drown. I
imagine you’d become so paralyzed with fear, death would feel like a great peaceful welcome. I hope if I ever drown, I go down like a stone, not kicking and screaming and flailing my arms. The thought of this makes me panic. My whole body tenses-up and I start to flail. I feel Joel’s hands come around my waist. I kick until my feet scrape the sediment and I get my footing. I rake the wet hair from my forehead and tilt the water from my ears. “How’d I do?” I ask, knowing I did horrible, flailing and splashing and gasping like a frightened child.

“Aim at nothing, you’re sure to hit it,” he says.

The church bell peals four times across the valley. Four o’ clock. It’s hoisted hourly on Sundays by a Delta boot till dusk with an assault rifle, a thermos of sweetened tea, and a strip of dried mutton or cured goose.

“Dead man’s float,” he says. He leads me onto my stomach with a flat hand slid beneath my belly and he holds me afloat. “Deep breath.”

I take a deep breath and dip my head below the water. Bubbles tickle my nostrils and trawl my cheeks. I break the surface with a raucous gasp.

“Did you open your eyes?” he asks.

“Was I supposed to?” I ask and wipe water from my eyes. What a strange question. Why would you open your eyes? What would you even see down there below the water? I imagine you wouldn’t see anything at all, and even if you could, it’d be covered in water.

High clouds eclipse the sun and the wind kicks-up.

“Your lips have gone blue,” he says and wades toward the shore. Teeth chattering, I follow him. Silt to pebbles to rocks. I pull on my jeans and t-shirt over my mismatched bikini, rummaged from the powerhouse cast-off bins. I never owned a bathing suit in my whole life. What’d be the point of owning one? Imagine going through the whole process of changing into different clothes just to get them wet! It’s as ridiculous as pajamas. Owning a whole set of clothes just to wear to bed!

Joel punches through his t-shirt and sits at my side. Water pools beneath his distressed combat shorts and paints the rocks dark, smooth as bird eggs.

It wasn’t until Joel and I drifted across America I discovered the meaning of securely-belonging to someone without feeling the need to fill the silence with meaningless words, like when I was a little girl at the Military Academy Preparatory School in Boston, where every night, I whispered into my pillow, pretending it was my parents, telling them all the frustrations of my day—my heartbreak, my tears, and my loneliness—with all my sorrows centered on a vague sketch of a perfect couple, until one day I realized I was an orphan just like everyone else.

Joel’s the first person I felt like I belonged to because I can’t remember a time when I had a mother. She died shortly after I was born. I don’t even have an idea or a single memory of what she looked like or who she was. Just a name and a note. I used to read the note every day hoping to find answers and grasp more of who she was but I found nothing between the lines. If you want to know, her name was Anna. A common name, as common as my last name—Williams. She’s no more real to me than a fairy or a dragon or some enchanted creature who gave birth to me, lived for a short while, and departed somewhere else. My father? I never bothered to ask and no one’s ever offered any info. What’d be the point?

I always held the strong belief children should be loved by their parents. I never felt love because I never had anyone to give it to me. I’m not asking for anyone’s pity. That’s my story. My parents
didn’t care for me. They gave me away. How can anyone understand this? I can’t. Children should be loved. They should have somebody to love them. Mine gave me up. Why do you think they’d do something like that? Was my birth so painful my mother hated me for it? Was I a horrible baby? Did I come out looking ugly and red like a boiled lobster? Did I cry incessantly like a shrieking animal? Were they sorry they had me? Or were they incapable of love? I’ll never know and it’s been so long, I don’t care. They probably just wanted peace from a crying baby. I don’t blame them. I used to dream big about who they were and who I was by extension, and it was good enough. I know it’s dumb but it’s all I had.

I was an unhappy child. Nobody had anything of value and happiness couldn’t be bought. There were no books, no music, and little communication—and I was starved for it all. Shouldn’t there be happy times to recall from childhood? A favorite toy? A special gift like an engraved hairbrush or a gold locket? A favorite meal or a treat? A special birthday party? I was surrounded by strangers. I had friends but it was just a formality. No one wanted me so I spent my whole life looking for affection. Other kids could go to their parents and share their problems, hopes, and dreams. Why couldn’t I? Listen, like I said before, I don’t want pity. I had all the rights a child deserves. A roof over my head, three hot meals, and a warm safe place of refuge. That’s my story. I won’t be pitied. If anyone referred to me as Poor Little Ellie, I’d feel miserable and lonely. Once you feel pity, you’ve lost everything. You start to feel unjustly hurt, wronged, and you become so full of complaints and anger that you pour it out to anyone who’ll listen, and even those who don’t.

I twist my wet hair into a low ponytail and wring the water over the rocks. Joel’s legs are very long, twice as long as mine. I wonder if mine will ever grow as long as his and if I’ll ever be as tall as him. When we’re standing, I have to put my head back as far as it goes if I want to look him in the eyes. I wonder if I’ll end-up looking like him as I get older. I’ve seen it happen with adopted kids. It’s uncanny. They take-on the temperament of their new family members and grow to look like they were made for their particular adoptive parents.

“Do you think I’ll ever be as tall as you?” I ask.

“I ain’t reckoning to know,” he says.

I wouldn’t mind being as tall as him but I wouldn’t want to be covered in hair like him. Dark hair on the backs of his hands, on his toes, on his chest, on his ass. I’d rather stay little and low if it means being hairless. Joel looks like all the other men out here. Deeply-tanned work-hardened bodies and calloused hands. Skin burnt deep by the sun, tanned like leather. Huge arms and thighs, broad shoulders, and narrow waists. Huge hands and feet. The Deltas are the first men I’ve seen in my life. The men in Boston were cut from the same mold. Soft, thin, and pale. Like women with soft hands. Their hearts and mouths were the only hard parts about them.

“Who taught you how to swim?” I ask.

“Cousins,” he says. “Summers down at the Gulf. I’d stay in that muddy water till I swole-up like an old toad.”

“Is it hard remembering stuff?” I ask.

“Ain’t much stuff worth remembering.” He rises and sheathes his .45 semi-automatic pistol to a holster and slips his .357 Magnum revolver to strong-side appendix carry, its steel fittings polished from sweat and sun. “Heard about you and Tommy.”

My heart skips a beat. “Tommy told you?”

“Those things have a way of coming out.”
“It wasn’t my fault. That girl Ashley called me a feral.”

“I don’t care what she called you and you shouldn’t, either. Insults are aimed low. They’re not gonna hit you unless you’re already down.”

“I called her a blood-fucker.” He hates when I curse but I tell him this because I want him to know I can defend myself when he’s not around.

“Stop slinging around ‘em curses,” he says. “It doesn’t go out here. Neither does fighting, disobeying, and talking about what we did and where we did it. Keep your mouth shut and stay outta trouble.”

“So many rules,” I say.

“The rules aren’t any more rigid than one would expect. They’re there for a reason. To keep you safe, to keep you outta trouble.”

“Bullshit.”

“Know your place and keep it,” he says, his voice edged rough in command, and his words falling hard and infallible.

“So I was supposed to stand there and do nothing?” I ask.

“You made a mistake,” he says.

“How was it a mistake?”

“Stop wasting my time arguing fool questions.”

He’s starting to use his Texas Territory twang with me so I know he’s getting fired-up. It comes out when he gets angry, which is almost always. He has this manner of restrained violence about him. You feel it all the time. It builds to an unbelievable tension but Joel’s not violent. His anger’s volatile but it doesn’t carry over into anything. The tension’s simply him. To be around him is to be around this tension. He’s not easy to live with. He’s always edgy and wary.

“Fine,” I say. “I’ll never stick-up for myself again.”

“Don’t ever do that,” he says. “Don’t ever change nothing unless you’re absolutely sure you’re right.”

“But you just said I was wrong!”

“I didn’t say you were wrong. I said you made a mistake.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Never mind that!”

“Why’re you yelling?”

“Keep breaking ‘em rules and you’d best expect to get yelled at!”

“Everyone’s always telling me what to do!”

“Then act like you’ve been listening! You don’t see ‘em other girls getting into trouble, do you?”
He gestures toward the powerhouse, meaning the Zetas.

“Fuck them!” I yell, my face flushed warm in anger.

Joel never swears. An austere man of clean careful habits, he says cursing goes against his principles of using bad words that can’t be repeated in the presence of a lady. Ladies like the Zetas, skirted and heeled at church, their lips slicked with rancid butter rations, their eyelashes dabbed with black-cake shoe polish, their ears sparkling with gold studs, and their hair parted and woven around fragrant columbine stems overnight. Who the hell has time to mess with their hair? Mine’s full of chicken shit by the time I’m through with chores. Everything about me has to be hard—my hands, my hair, my skin, my feelings—or else I’d never get anything useful done. I’d be of no use to anyone.

I’m angry. Anyone could see this. I’m angry at Joel and I’m angry at myself for always being angry. I hate being angry. What’s the use of it? Who and what am I going to use my anger against? Will I always be like this? God, I hope not. I can’t imagine living my whole life being like this.

Most of the time, I don’t want to use bad words but using them always makes me feel a little bit better. Fact is, I act like this to keep people away from me. I know this. I don’t need to be told. I don’t want boys pestering me and I don’t want girls befriends me. Life’s too short to form attachments to people, places, and things. If I’m not interested in someone, I not interested. If someone’s interesting to me, I want to learn as much about them as I can. I let everyone else go. I don’t want to waste my precious time. We live for such a short time. I don’t want to look back and think I’ve wasted it on someone not worthy of my time. It’s that simple. I suppose if I’d been born looking like a monster, it’d be easier to keep people away. Sometimes I feel like I bring misfortune on people. I want very little in life. I just want people to live quietly and peacefully but this never seems to happen to the people around me.

I don’t understand rural people and I suppose it makes me afraid of them. I feel more comfortable around QZ people. I’m a stranger out here. A tourist. A damn Yankee. I can’t read their faces or emotions. I can read them about as well as I can read what a cow or sheep thinks, which means I can’t read them at all. They may as well be cows and sheep for all I understand them.

The truth is, I feel small and inadequate next to the rural girls out here. They’re tall, rawboned, and well-developed by the time they’re twelve, and they know it. The hayshed lofts know it, too. If the Zetas actually wore underwear, there’d be piles of mislaid panties up there. How do I know they don’t wear underwear? I’m not a pervert. They make it so you can’t notice, always bending over for no good reason when the Deltas are around or sitting around with their legs sprawled. I suppose they grew-up watching farm animals fuck every single day so what do you expect? They watched foals, calves, and lambs being born weekly. It makes the whole thing seem so simple and ordinary, I suppose. They grow-up familiar with their own bodies and the bodies of their siblings, living in such close quarters with zero privacy.

In Boston, the men looked at the women no differently than they looked at a sack of potatoes or a plate of beans. They never looked at me. What would any guy be doing with the likes of me? The fast girls were called skanks and sluts and hoes with great disdain. There was a lot of supervision in Boston. Only the wicked girls fucked around. We were all too worried about getting infected, getting STDs, or getting pregnant. Skull and crossbones between our legs. Puritans, you know. The girls who fucked were in committed relationships because of the lack of contraception, and the dangers and fears of unwanted pregnancy. Consequences. Sex outside of marriage was ferociously detested. Marriage was for social status and security. We could all hear everyone playing with themselves at night—the snap of elastic on skin, the rhythmic groan of bedsprings, those squishy slurpy dirty noises of cunt fucking that give themselves away. No one cared. It was as normal as
brushing your teeth before bed. There was no privacy. What were our options? If there were options, they didn’t give us any. There was no sexual liberation and little equality between the sexes.

The girls out here call themselves skanks and sluts and hoes, and wear it like a badge of honor. Everyone has to grow-up fast out here. Boys have to become men overnight. The land out here’s so bleak, hard, and tough that men and women need to be like this to survive. The rural kids got that over us QZ kids. Out here I stand-out. I’m small and underdeveloped for my age. I’ve got one pair of old sneakers, I’ve never worn a dress in my life, and I don’t wear make-up. I wouldn’t even know how to use it if I had any. I don’t like boys even when they’re cute and the ones who like me never are. None of this matters because I have nothing in me that attracts anyone anyway.

I drop my eyes and sweep my damp hair past my shoulder. “I get it,” I say. “You’re ashamed of me. Because I’m not like them.”

He scoffs. “You’re talking like a damn fool.”

“This place makes me feel like one.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning I’m not allowed to do anything.”

“You have work to do every day.”

“That’s not what I meant.

He shakes his head, no. “I reckon I’ve said too much or too little but I’ve said all I aim to say.”

We stare at the lake in that strange vacuum of silence that always follows an argument. I don’t have to look at his face to know it’s stormy. It changes in a flash. If you didn’t know him, it’s a face you’d be scared of. I was at first. It’s like there’s a fine thread holding everything inside him together and the constant threat it could snap at any moment. He’s the strong silent type. A lot of the quiet ones seem like they’re deep thinkers but they’re actually idiots who have nothing interesting to say. Or they’re the quiet shy types who use it as an act and you have no idea how they behave when they’re alone.

Late afternoon sun casts golden bars across the timberlines. I watch the deep blue sky and snow-topped mountains reflected in the glassy surface of the lake. So what. I’ve seen it everywhere before. The only thing I like out here is how the shadows of the clouds play across the fields and how it looks like they’re chasing each other over the mountaintops. You get this dazzling flash of the grass’ true color before it gets blotted-out in shadow. After a minute of watching this, I break the silence. “Did Tommy tell you he was gonna punish me?” I’d intended to be specific about the type of punishment but even the thought of Tommy seeing me in my underwear is mortifying.

“Good punishment’s no more than a notion,” he says, “leaves no lasting damage but your own pride.”

“I thought you were in charge of my punishment.”

“Tommy knows what works best around here.”

“Do you think he’s bluffing?”

“Tommy ain’t the kind to forgive and forget. He’ll do what he says he’ll do.”
“But he can’t really do it, can he?”

He sighs sharply through his nose. “Tommy and I—we were born in a different time. This here was a different country. Back in ‘em days, it was easier to tame the animal in man. We were born moral, innocent as doves. Now we run wild, hungry as wolves. Our hearts grew hard. They had to.”
After breakfast in the mess’ Z Club, I head to the Ark for chores. The Ark was Joel’s suggestion, not mine. The other option was digging around the mud at Eden, the downriver Vale gardens. No, thanks. I waded through enough mud with him to last a lifetime. There’s less of it at the Ark, a grassy swath between the lake reservoir and a large tributary arm of the river where I tend to livestock raised for slaughter.

I should be happy enough to be around animals every day but I have to remind myself constantly they’re dumb beasts. Animals are raised to be eaten, not to be cuddled as pets. Not for entertainment, not for companionship. Why should I have a problem with this? I don’t know but I do. I’m not sentimental. I’m not. I just can’t imagine having to sell your animals to buy seeds or food or weapons or tools. I can’t imagine a person having to do this. Could you imagine having to hand-over your horse to a stranger for slaughter? He’d look at you, his master, and be like, ‘I’m just an innocent horse. I gave you companionship and transportation, and I only asked for some food and water in return. Where are you taking me? What’s going to happen to me? Why aren’t you coming with me?’ It rips the heart out of me to think about this. Animals are emotions and emotions are dangerous. Animals aren’t smart. They have no feelings. I don’t believe this but I have to remind myself over and over. Eat or be eaten.

I head to the Ark gates and spot Tommy in the guardhouse, twenty feet up, in a mighty cedar overhung with pendulous boughs. As guard commander, he oversees guard duty rotation. He salutes a handful of kitted-up Deltas and starts descending the stairs. I stop at the bottom, blocking his exit, with the intention of speaking to him. My mouth goes dry and my hands go cold. What am I going to say to him? It’s not that I don’t know what to say, it’s that I’ve always got a million questions to ask.

While Joel and I drifted, to pass the time, I asked him about everything. The sky, the earth, the sea, the animals. When I got bored with all the nature stuff, I asked him about his old life in Texas Territory. He never told me much. The one thing he said about his brother was that when they’re apart, he misses him but when they’re together, he knows it’s going to end in a fight. They lived in Boston together but Tommy didn’t stick around very long. I don’t know why he left but I think at a certain point, it’s impossible to stick around the people who you’ve gone through deep sorrow and pain with. What’s the point of being around someone if all you can remember are the bad times and dead people between yourselves? Talking and reminiscing about dead people. Dead people who should be alive and here. It’s no way to live.

Tommy stops on the last step and looks down at me with bored dispassionate eyes. “Joel’s on sentry duty,” he says and gestures toward the guardhouse at the Ark’s far retaining wall where I suppose he’s stationed for the next couple hours.

“I’m not looking for him,” I say. “I was looking for you. I wanna ask you a question.”

“Certainly,” he says, and frames his belt kit.

“Are you still gonna punish me?”

“I’m expecting to.”
“With your belt?” I ask, and glance at his canvas military web belt with its flat brass buckle. Right at this moment, I swear to God, a ray of sunlight streams through the swaying boughs and hits the buckle, gleaming maliciously. I swear this just happened.

“It’s gotta be done,” he says, his eyes grimly amused.

“Can’t I just apologize?”

“I don’t want none of your damn apologies.”

“Can Joel punish me instead?”

“Joel’s too soft on you. He lets you have your way. It’s made you headstrong and wild.”

“You’re not my guardian.”

“Don’t bother your head about it. Joel’s done his part. It’s time for him to step back and let the law take a hand.”

“I told him what you said.”

“What are you getting at?” he asks, his eyes narrowing into slits.

“What you said you’d do to me.”

“What I’m doing’s none of his business and what he’s doing’s none of mine. No use being difficult about it.”

“I’m not being difficult. I just don’t understand why you’re allowed to do it.”

“Well, you won’t have to worry about it much longer.”

Neither of us moves nor speaks for a long moment until he breaks the silence. “Something else you’re wanting from me? If not, step aside. I don’t like folks breathing down my neck.”

I take a big step back, giving him room to pass.

He stands in the spot where I just stood and looks at me, his eyes full of contempt. “When folks get to crowding me, I’mma put ‘em where they ain’t gonna bother me no more. Remember that.” He cuts past me and strides down the footpath.

Here’s something. Tommy’s not afraid to look me in the eye. Joel’s eyes are always watching everywhere to see what everyone’s doing. Not in a nosey or shifty or distracted way but in an observant way. His restless eyes take-in everything. He avoids my eyes unless he’s yelling at me or trying to make me do something I don’t want to do, or trying to enforce his way of doing things. Even then, his eyes shift away from mine every couple seconds like he can’t remember if he’s supposed to be yelling at the walls or the ceiling or the mountains or his feet, or whatever he’s angry at that day. So there it is.

He and Tommy were raised by the same parents but no one would ever guess it. They don’t have much in common aside from the fact they know how to use their hands and they talk with a Texas Territory twang. Joel’s stern, demanding, deliberate, and decisive. Tommy’s arrogant and authoritative, inflexible and stubborn. He seems to have no regret or remorse for his actions and no compassion for weaknesses or mistakes.

Both of them are vital and magnetic, with cold brooding confidence that attracts admiration from
both men and women alike. Both of them command respect in their own way, and have a reputation for honesty and integrity. But Joel struggles to control the angry vicious moods and violent impulses that overcome him when he’s provoked or antagonized. He swings between resigned detachment, and sudden violent eruptions of grief and rage. It always comes out sooner or later.

Outside the Ark’s chicken coop below barley tree shade, hungry hens, pullets, and roosters scratch the grass, peck at stones, roll in the dirt, and hide beneath the roof from gliding hawks. The Ark’s overseer, Langley, saunters from the coop apartments with a bucket of large brown eggs. She sets it down at my feet and tilts her chin in impassive greeting.

“Units and troughs, bunks and tanks,” she says, listing today’s chores. That’s it. That’s our whole conversation. That’s all she ever says to me. She rummages a split-front chest rig and pulls-out a corn husk cigarette with sun-darkened hands, her fingers twisted from hard labor. I wonder if my hands will look like that one day. God, I hope not. It’s not that I mind hard work. I like to work hard because I like to be good at things. I just don’t care about being the best. I suppose in the winter, when nothing grows, work isn’t as hard. You check on the animals, feed them in their stalls, and walk them around on the nicer days. But here’s the thing. I can’t imagine staying here long enough to find out. I can’t imagine growing old and dying here. Being buried in the cemetery next to the big white church with my name crudely carved on a piece of slate. It’s of no value to me. It’s not that I don’t mind living here for a bit. I just don’t want to die here. It weighs on me greatly. This is something I need to talk to Joel about. He’s not going to be happy to have this conversation with me. I can tell you that right now.

In the coop apartments, I wrap a shemagh over my nose and mouth to shut-out the bad smells. Crested white males and reddish-tan hens watch me with beady eyes. I sweep the dropping boards and rotate the bedding. Beneath the shit-flecked pine branches in a corner roost, I find a large brown egg. Langley’s oversight, my advantage. I nestle it between my breasts, still hot from the hen. Zetas covet raw eggs for their egg packs. They beat a raw egg till it’s fluffy, add a little bit of oil, and spread it all over their faces and necks to help with clear skin. I don’t have bad skin and I don’t like eggs. It’s for Joel.

Scroggins’ twanged bass voice crescendos beyond the walls. I exit the coop as he, Langley, and Grat—his long-faced foster son, apprentice, and farrier—walk toward the turn-out paddocks, double-corrals, and stables where they oversee the grooming, cleaning, tack-up, bathing, and riding of Tennessee Walkings, American Paints, and Dutch Warmbloods. We’ve got very good horses here. They say they’re the fastest strongest toughest stock in the western territories.

With Langley distracted by Scroggins and Grat, I’ll take a little break to visit Joel. What’s the harm in it? I scan the far retaining wall and spot him on sentry duty, glassing the northern landscape with his rangefinders. He puts them away and draws his rifle across his shoulders in a military press. I know this posture. He’d never admit it but he’s bored out of his mind.

I jog past knots of grazing sheep and climb the guardhouse stairs to the narrow deck. I dig the egg from my bra and offer it to him. He smiles blandly and takes it. Joel rarely smiles. He rarely permits himself the luxury. A downward cast to his mouth tells you he hasn’t allowed himself to smile much in two decades. You can see the sadness on his face. The lines between his eyes. He’s a serious man. I suppose he has to be like this. We would’ve never survived if he hadn’t been so serious about everything. A few seconds is all it takes to die. You can’t risk those precious seconds being distracted by a laugh.

He’s got other reasons, too. He says to appreciate the warmth of the day you have to suffer cold nights, like the eve of the Critical when his daughter was murdered by patrolling military. That’s
all I know about it and I don’t want to know the details. It’s horrible enough she’s dead. It doesn’t matter how many times he’s been exonerated of her murder. He’s crippled by unatonable guilt. It’s like every memory of her is as painful as the thousands that came before it.

That watch he wears? He doesn’t need to wear that watch. It doesn’t even keep the time. It’s been broken for as long as I’ve known him. Imagine wearing a watch. Nobody does this. Time of day’s told by the length and cast of shadows. He wears it because it was his daughter’s last gift to him. He hasn’t told me much about her but he’s told me this much. I suppose he told me because I was always making fun of him for wearing a watch. She gave him the watch for his birthday, which was on the eve of the Critical. I imagine he was so happy to have such a nice gift on his birthday, he laughed and smiled when she gave it to him. I suppose it was the last time he ever saw her laugh and smile, too. He intends to wear that watch till the day he dies. He’ll be buried in it. It’s as much a part of his arm as his elbow or his wrist, and he’d be just as lost without it.

So you wouldn’t call Joel a happy man. He’s closed-in on himself like a clam in its shell. Once you understand his loss, you understand he’s afraid to be hurt again. The memory of his loss and pain plays over and over in his head. How can he hold onto trauma like that for half his life? How’s the pain still so fresh? Doesn’t the brain try to heal those memories and dull the pain? I don’t want this to ever happen to me. I don’t want to love something so much and have it taken from me. I don’t care if it’s a person, an animal, a place, or an idea.

He inhales exaggeratedly. “Smell that?” he asks.

I sniff the air mingled with sweet hemlock and gamey livestock. “Smells like shit,” I say. I’m being difficult. You can actually breathe very well out here.

“That smell means we don’t gotta be hunters and gatherers no more,” he says. “Raise what we eat and eat what we raise.”

“Keeps me outta trouble, right?”

“Good honest work. Day isn’t over till you’ve got dirt under your nails and mud on your clothes.”

“Aren’t you sick of it? Guard duty, sentry, prowler, bed-down. Guard duty, sentry, prowler, bed-down—”

“I ain’t saying,” he says, interrupting me.

“Seeing the same people every day and doing the same thing as the day before.”

“There’s plenty to do here.”

“Don’t you miss Boston?”

“I miss the swing of the axe and the call of the cattle. Nothing like the ache of ‘em muscles after a hard day’s work.”

We’ve been here a little over a month but it feels like a year. What kind of life is this? It’s good enough, I guess. It’s a life for someone with no ambitions. Sit by the lake all day in the summer and stare up at the clouds. Sit by the fire in the winter and listen to the wind blowing down the mountains. It’s the kind of life for someone who doesn’t want to be anyone or do anything. I wish I could talk to Joel about this but he’d just say Jackson’s no different from the QZ minus the skyscrapers. Whenever I tell him it’s boring out here, he says something like, ‘You’re mixing-up boring with quiet.’ This is something he always says. Just watch. “It’s so boring here,” I say.
“You’re mixing-up boring with quiet,” he says.

See? There it is!

“Ain’t half-bad,” he says. “Life ain’t all vacations. There’s dignity in work well-done. Knowing how to do things the best way and doing it right. Work hard, deal honestly with yourself and others, use careful judgment, and do unto others as you’d have ‘em do unto you. Reward’ll follow soon enough.”

I pitch my weight against the wooden rails stacked high with sandbags and I gaze at the sky. Pure blue brilliant tints. I never looked at the sky till I came here. I always kept my eyes to the ground. I never looked at faces and never made eye contact—that was asking for trouble. Who needed more trouble? In Boston, the views were interrupted by rooftops and crumbling skyscrapers. Here, the stars twinkle in grander clearer constellations. Nights steep darker. The high sun eclipses snow-capped mountains beneath wide-open skies.

Everyone talks about the mountains like they’re some wondrous thing but they depress me. I find them gloomy and lonesome, cold and impersonal. Joel says after a while I’ll start to see them differently, says I’ll start to link them to the animals and trees living among them. They were here before the world was born, and they make him feel safe and protected. What else should I expect from a country man?

Before the Critical, he was a construction worker. He’s not ambitious. He never even went to college. He doesn’t write. It’s not that he doesn’t know how but he doesn’t believe things should be put down in writing. I’ve never even seen his handwriting. He’s a simple man but he’s got a deep poeticism. It’s not hard to miss. Talk to him for a minute and you’ll understand this. He didn’t go to college because he had his daughter when he was around my age and I’m not sure he would’ve wanted to, anyway. He can read, write, and do basic math, and it’s good enough for him. He says big cities made him uneasy. He’d go when he had to but he always liked coming back home to his big house in Travis County, in Austin.

I miss Boston. The ocean. I miss the smell of it and the sound of the roaring waves beating on the shore against the rocks. The way it shimmered in the sun and seemed to stretch to infinity until it met the horizon. I miss the harbor and how you could see out to the end of the world over the sea, calm and blue and vast, the biggest thing I ever saw until I came out here and saw the mountains. There were always a couple of military boats, warships, and fishing boats many miles away, belching black smoke into the sky. Fishermen and trawlers who reeked of fish. They’d come back every couple days from trawling with the seagulls shrieking overhead. Their faces were sunburnt and covered in rough beards. Their clothes were covered in fish scales and fish guts, and their hands were black from the tarred ropes. They had to lock-up these ropes because people stole them and smoked them like tobacco. Imagine that.

The only thing Jackson has over Boston is the smells. The smells of the QZ were worse. The air was toxic. Streets and back alleys smelled of urine, garbage, and decay. Wet clothes. Horse shit and human shit. Urine and vomit. The brick row houses down by the Charles had no plumbing so everyone went to the bathroom in the alleys or in the river. Everything indoors was covered in grease, slime, and thick black soot from the oil lamps. Greasy damp furniture, sheets, and clothes. Stale food and filthy stained beds. Sleeping with your clothes on. The confinement, the strict curfews, and the dumb rules like no gathering in groups. Everyone was suspicious and evasive. There was the constant threat of being harassed, arrested, or murdered by the military.

Joel leans against the railing at my side. “Reckon you feel like a big fish in a little pond,” he says. “Give it some time. A new adventure. When I was a little boy, you had to seek it out yourself. It
didn’t come looking for you. We dreamed of feathered headdresses and tomahawks from our fathers’ fathers’ tales, mounted on a wild stallion with a trusty rifle, whooping and hollering down a dusty trail, wrestling grizzlies hand-to-hand, and scalping Indians before they could scalp you.

“We grew up and felt sorry for our kids. Those things couldn’t be had no more, had to be watched on TV, on a computer, or in a park surrounded by skyscrapers and concrete. Windows looked out onto brick walls. Not a tree, a body of water, or a blade of grass for a hundred miles. You couldn’t take a step outta your own house without trespassing into your neighbor’s yard, fences as high as the eye could see. Cities wiped-out nature and displaced big game. Everything wild was doomed to extinction. Vanishings. Out here’s land as nature made it.”

Kids in the Old World had miraculous things. Clean beautiful clothes, movie theaters with all the movies they could watch, and all the candy they could eat. They didn’t have to use their hands for anything. They lacked nothing. I suppose I should be jealous of their comforts but I feel sorry for them. They never knew the peacefulness of a quiet sky without airplanes flying overhead, wandering without trespassing into a nosy neighbor’s yard, or looking up and not seeing wires and cables, and all sorts of ugly things.

The landing groans. Joel swings-up his rifle and sweeps it toward the noise. It’s Eve, one of Maria’s friends, plodding up the stairs. “Morning!” she yells. She crosses onto the deck in cut-off denim shorts with a jeweled belt buckle and cowgirl boots.

Joel touches the brim of his greasy baseball cap. “Ma’am,” he murmurs. I don’t know if he’s being sarcastic or serious but I laugh anyway.

“I was headed this way and figured y’all wanted company,” she says. “I imagine it gets pretty lonesome on guard shift all alone.” She addresses me. “Does Langley not have work for you?”

“Langley’s fine with my work,” I say.

“Langley’s easy to please,” she says.

Look at this bitch, I think to myself. I glance at Joel, hoping to catch his eye. He won’t look at me. I want him to reassure me with a look that says, ‘Yeah, Ellie, she’s nasty as hell,’ but he won’t look at me. I hope he’s thinking this. How could he not be thinking this?

She pitches against the railing, and scans the field. “Seen any bears out yonder?” she asks him, gesturing toward the ridgeline.

“No, ma’am,” he says.

“Cougars?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Lions?”

“None of ‘em.”

“Wolves?”

“None.”

“Them wolves slipped a mess of calves and lambs this spring. Ready for the mourners the day they were born.”
People have a great fear of wolves out here. I thought they were being paranoid but Joel said wolves weren’t always as vicious as they are now. He said in the Old World, they were timid and skittish, and kept to themselves, but they got used to being well-fed with abundant food and did everything to maintain it. That’s when they got vicious and stayed vicious. How should I know these things? We didn’t have wolves in Boston. We had old fishermen who smelled like the red tide. Inbred Puritans who were born with way too many teeth in their mouths and thought drinking on Sunday would send you straight to Hell.

Eve looks at me and says, “Steer clear of ’em woods, Ellie. There’s trouble out there. Don’t go running around that wild country.”

I want to tell her not to talk to me. I don’t like the look of her and I don’t like the sound of her voice. Throaty and abrasive, and she talks through her nose. When she speaks to Joel and the other Deltas, she speaks in an annoying baby voice. She’s the kind of woman who thinks she’s deserving of every other woman’s envy and of every man’s infatuation. I’ve always been suspicious of very manly men and very womanly women. They act that way because they’re running scared from something.

“There’s a lot worse than wolves prowling around the woods,” I say. I saw a lot of bad things happen out there. I’ll never forget those things.

Her hard hazel eyes flash malice. “I reckon you’re new to this territory but I’ve lived out here yonder my whole life and there are dangers you know nothing about. I know parts of these mountains you’ll never see. You can’t come out here and get the notion you can run things to suit yourself. Folks have been here a powerful spell and they ain’t asking your advice.” She addresses Joel with a smile, “I reckon with someone like you on patrol, wolves won’t be a problem no more.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask.

Hard lines settle around her mouth. “You know good and well what it means. Someone of his general size and skill.”

Joel massages his rifle. “I promise to keep ’em at bay, ma’am,” he says, his voice genial.

“Do you always keep your promises?” she asks.

“I don’t do much promising, but when I do, that promise’s gonna be kept.”

I roll my eyes at Joel. He won’t look at me. Eve smiles contentedly and scans the horizon. I hate this smile. It’s smug and her eyes are melty. “This is the most beautiful territory in the whole world. For every nice view y’all got back east, we’ve got a dozen better. I never wanna leave. Y’all should’ve seen it before we settled it. Empty as an orphan’s stocking on Christmas morning. Our cattle can run as fast as ‘em horses. Big, tall, and strong with a mess of muscle. Wasn’t God nor the Devil that made ’em that way—we did—in the spirit of this rugged territory.”

She talks about this place like it’s the only place in the world where you can see these kinds of things. Well, there’s more out there. I saw it with Joel—places that’d make Jackson look boring and small. This could be any other territory in the world, and it’d look and feel no different. She loves it here but how’s she even know what she loves if she’s never seen anything else to compare it to? There’s nothing out here but mountains, sunshine, and fresh air. How can you say one place is better than the other if you’ve never been anywhere else? It doesn’t make sense.

What’s someone like her doing here, anyway? With anyone else, you figure they’re here because rural life suits them—hard work and the pride that comes from doing it. Wake, eat, work, sleep.
Her arrogance keeps her here, like she’s waiting around for everyone to die, or to marry-up so she can become the queen of this place. She grates on my nerves but I need to try harder not to let her know she bothers me. Normally I wouldn’t care what anyone thinks, but for some reason, I do with her.

She’s an old family friend of Maria’s and she’s been at Jackson since the beginning. While everyone fled public property and shored-up their homes with hoarded supplies, Maria’s father took over Jackson’s power plant. It was a gamble but it paid-off. The rivers and reservoir lakes provide electricity, sanitation, irrigation, and security, and its position in the mountains offers strategic protection and abundant game. During the first decade, before medical supplies dwindled and expired, the emphasis was on breeding. The heartiest citizens were polygamists. They originally planned to expand toward the valley but it was too risky because that’s where the Cresskills live, the Carter’s rivals. I didn’t have to wait long to find this out. The week after we arrived, a dozen Cresskill riders raided at dusk and tried to stampede our horses. They’ve got common sorrels so you can’t blame them for trying to wrangle our stock but could you imagine running a settlement so poorly you can’t even breed good horses? They’re in the valley where grass and water is plentiful, which makes it even more pathetic.

Eve pulls from the railing and addresses Joel. “I’m stopping-in on your brother before the infirmary. Wanna send a word?”

“Nothing much,” he says.

“Well then, so long,” she says and descends the stairs.
Chapter Five

Joel pulls a bandana from his pocket. He takes off his baseball cap and wipes his sweaty forehead, nose, and neck. We watch Eve plod toward the chicken coop. Is she aware of how she walks? The way her feet splay out like a horse hitched to a wagon? She walks like she knows there’ll always be solid ground beneath her feet no matter where she goes. Bless her, I think, meaning the opposite. Look at her, for God’s sake. Nothing redeeming about her. I want to cut her down to Joel but he’d pretend he didn’t even know if she were a man or a woman.

She stops in front of the chicken coop where Langley’s slaughtering a deeply muscled rooster, its legs bound in taut wire stretched between two slender birches. Langley’s killing it for Eve. For one of her cook-ups. She hosts one every-other Sunday with Tommy and Maria. She lives with them in their large log cabin in the Vale. It’s the nicest house here. It’s big enough for a dozen families but it’s just the three of them. I suppose she’s there to run the household since Maria’s not really the domestic type, if you know what I mean. Even if she was, she’d have no time to take care of the household.

“I can’t stand her,” I say to Joel.

“Why not?” he asks.

“I just don’t like her.”

“I suppose that’s reason enough.”

“She doesn’t like me very much.”

“You’re free to choose your own friends.”

“She likes you.”

“That kinda woman never affected me none.”

“Fake?” I ask. Can he see how fake she is? How could he not?

“Some folks could own the whole world and they still wouldn’t be happy,” he says. “They’d still want the sun and the moon and the stars.”

No one could imagine this place without Eve because she won’t let you forget her. She’s always around. I try not to talk about her too much because I feel like no good comes from gossip. All I really want to do is not think about her but it seems like no matter where you are or what you’re doing, she’s there.

Fact is, when I’m not doing chores, I’m anywhere but Zeta. I only go there to sleep. Evenings I’m either visiting Joel in Delta or hanging out with Gold in the infirmary. Gold’s Jackson’s chief physician. Our Dear Lord of expired antibiotics, dull syringes, crude antiseptics, harsh emetics, harsher laxatives, repugnant suppositories, and herb brew-ups. Joel aside, he’s my only friend here. Eve’s the chief nursing officer below him so I always run into her there. We treat each other with formal politeness and that’s good enough.
I like Gold because he’s not like anyone I’ve ever met. Before the Critical, he was a plastic surgeon in Beverly Hills where he sculpted Hollywood stars, venture capitalists, and industrialists from a time when, in his own words, ‘icy champagne flowed as deep as the tamed seaports, and roads ran level and straight.’ Now he drains tangerine-sized cysts and scoops-out golf ball-sized ulcers. You’ve got an ailment, he’s got a cure. Angelica root brew-ups for malaria, walnut-shell compresses for dysentery, and willow bark brew-ups for migraines.

He knows everything about everybody here. He knows whose illnesses are real and imaginary, and he’s always equally sympathetic. He knows everyone’s ailments and weaknesses. He’s been to all the births and deaths here. All the christenings, weddings, and funerals. He’s one of the three people here who knows my secret. Him, Tommy, and Joel.

I guess I could start by talking about my scars. Joel’s got a lot more than me. Some people say scars are a nice reminder of how lucky you are to be alive but it’s not true. Scars are trouble. They represent trouble and they make trouble. You can try to forget your tragedies and traumas, but no matter how far you put them out of your head, if you have a scar, you’re always reminded of the wound. The bitterness comes again and again. You can forget about things like words and fights but you can never forget a scar.

The first thing anyone would notice about me is a little cut across my eyebrow from a stupid fight with a stupid girl in Boston. So I guess I’ll always look a little bit wild. It doesn’t matter. It’s part of me and I don’t even notice it anymore. I have a bigger scar. On my forearm. It’s there but it’s not. I’ll explain that in a bit. Anyone who knows my secret knows about that scar. It’s the whole reason Joel and I left Boston, and the whole reason we’re here.

I’ll never forget that night as long as I live. I’m sure they’re still talking about it in Boston unless something crazier happened in the couple years since then. That night started-out normal like any other night I broke curfew. The same breathless reckless thrill mixed-in with a little prayer that nothing goes wrong and you return safely to the dorms without getting caught, with a cool story to tell everyone. It was just me and my best friend that night. We were just teenagers doing what rebellious teenagers were supposed to be doing and we ran into trouble. We got ambushed by infectids and we both got bit. This actually happened. I never thought it would happen to me in my whole life. To even say these words—I Got Bit—is still unbelievable.

I wasn’t scared at first. That came after. I was angry at myself for being so stupid and careless. I was angry at my friend for leading me down the wrong path. This was an important lesson to learn. Some people just want to make trouble and draw you into it. Who knows why they’re like this? Stay away from these kinds of people. I remember thinking, I’m not supposed to die like this. Not now. I was only fourteen. I had my whole life in front of me.

That night and the next morning, I kept waiting to die but nothing happened. Nothing at all. You’d think I would’ve gotten a fever or a rash but I was the same girl with the same thoughts as before, just a little more frightened and confused, and feeling very lucky. There were some ugly red bumps from where the skin barrier broke but that was the only way you knew something had happened. Who knows why I’m immune? My friend wasn’t. It doesn’t matter. She’s dead and gone. I suppose some people enjoy talking and thinking about dead people but I’m not one of them.

Word went around to Boston’s Firefly faction, a well-connected fifth column whose main goal was finding a vaccine and a cure. Was finding a vaccine and a cure. Put a pin in that. That’s how I met Joel. He and his black market partner, Tess, were hired by the Fireflies to smuggle me out of the QZ to the Capitol Building where another group of Fireflies was supposed to escort me onto the next leg of the journey, which was to meet their doctors out West. The doctors who were cultivating a cure.
A woman named Marlene coordinated all this. She’s the leader of the Fireflies and she’s stationed in Boston. She was supposed to escort me to the Capitol Building herself but she got wounded, which is why she asked Joel and Tess to do it instead. She’s the only person I know who knew my mother. They were friends. She checked-in with me over the years but we weren’t all that close.

Here’s something else. Neither Joel nor Tess took the job from Marlene because they cared about me, the Fireflies, or a cure. They were doing it for the payment, a massive amount of weapons. They were perfect for the job because they were good at skirting the law. There was a lot of crime in Boston. The military didn’t go after black marketers with a whole lot of enthusiasm. They were too busy going after rebels like the Fireflies; raiding, looting, and shooting-up the suburbs; and enforcing rules and curfew within the QZs. There weren’t many repercussions for petty crimes so there was little reason not to do them.

Listen, if you want to arrest people for breaking the law, you have to put them in jail. Jails were a huge waste of resources and space. And then you needed courts and judges to do the sentencing. So criminals ran free. The military figured smugglers like Joel and Tess would end-up dead soon enough, anyway. Unimportant. As long as you didn’t kill anyone important, you were free to do whatever crimes you could get away with. But if you were caught killing or stealing from VIPs or the military, you were hanged or exiled to one of the internment camps on those small islands in Massachusetts Bay. A proper jail would be impossible to run so it was more like a campground with tents and huts. No one really knows what happened over there, though, because word rarely came back. Those islands were impossible to escape.

Boston was a tough place for black marketers like Joel and Tess but not for someone like me living in a military academy with four walls protected 24-7 by armed guards and soldiers. So drifting with Joel across the country was the hardest and most significant thing I’d ever done in my life. Our lives depended on our determination to survive and harnessing our skills. Every direction we went, we found trouble, complications, and death. Tess didn’t make it. That’s how dangerous it was. She was cut down by a military ambush when we got to the Capitol Building along with the Firefly escorts. I was fourteen and everything hit me hard. Joel, too. His experience with women is elemental. He’s clung to a couple good ones like Tess and he avoids the bad ones. He’s like me around the opposite sex. Ill at ease. Some men can talk to women in a quiet confident way like they’re siblings who grew-up together their whole lives. Joel’s not like that with women. He’s not even like that with me.

When we set-out for Salt Lake City, Joel didn’t want to do it. He made this very clear. He only did it for Tess. It was her dying wish. She believed in a cure. Why? I didn’t know her long enough to know why she felt this way. I only knew a couple things about her. Her hair was just like mine. Not brown but not red, not too long and not too short. She was a tomboy, like me. There was nothing frivolous about her. She was very good-looking with small delicate features on a hard face. She could’ve been one of those girls who got everything she wanted by her looks alone but she never did because she was a hard worker. She wasn’t lazy and she had a mind of her own. She was determined and strong. She was almost as tall as Joel. He could’ve kissed her on the lips without bending down or even bending his neck at all but Tess was the kind of woman who would’ve given him a black eye for even trying it. They clearly had a thing for each other—how could they not?

Joel doesn’t talk about her much, which means he loved her very much. He’s tucked her away in the same place where he keeps his daughter, though it’s a different place than where he keeps his ex-wife who he only mentioned once or twice, and always obliquely. His marriage and ex-wife is something Not To Be Talked About. I don’t even know her name, where she was from, or how long they were married. With his ex-wife, it feels like whatever happened between them was so bad it burned-down to cold indifference. I’ve seen him do this before. He gets vicious to a certain point, reaches a threshold, and then goes quiet. He puts his rage on ice. I don’t like when he gets
I know I’m running-off at the mouth but Joel’s complicated. He’s the only person who ever took care of me and if you know Joel, it’s a big deal. He’s been hurt so much, he puts-up barriers between himself and the world so he can’t get hurt again. Like he’s not going to give anyone the chance to cross those barriers. I suppose it’s normal and I suppose we all do it. He’s just extreme about it. The pain sits inside him like a brick and nothing can move it away. When he lashes out, he’s not trying to spit his poison and misery on you. He’s just trying to move the brick around a bit. I always let him do it. He’s all man from head to toe but his heart’s tender like a woman’s. More tender than mine. Deep down inside, he’s all tenderness and hurt.

Sometimes I wish he’d just talk to me about it. Even if he were the type to bare his soul, there’s no socially acceptable way for the men here to deal with their emotions and fears other than getting drunk or fighting. Or having a sports match on the field behind the powerhouse. Boys don’t cry. Maybe it’s better he doesn’t tell me. Maybe his biggest fear is losing his hair, and getting fat and ugly. He bottles up his emotions. He needs a catharsis. He’s going to give himself an ulcer or a heart attack, I swear. Doesn’t he feel the need to get stuff off his chest? As a girl, I’m expected to pour out my heart to anyone who’ll listen. I have that privilege. I’m allowed. Who does he have? Nobody, that’s who.

I had to figure out all this stuff about him by myself. When we were running like hell to Salt Lake City, I got to know a lot about him. When you’re out in the wilderness with nothing but the sky over your head, you end-up studying each other a whole lot. Friendships and bonds form quicker.

For instance, I noticed something about him when he wakes-up. He opens his eyes, wipes away the spittle from the side of his mouth, and shakes his head like a bull. Then he yawns and rubs his chest. Usually it goes like this. But sometimes he wakes-up frightened with a look of hurt in his eyes and it takes him longer to get to his feet. It’s the kind of hurt that’s mental, not physical. You can see the heavy sorrow from all the lonely sad places he goes in his sleep, like he’s been groping and staggering around, alone and scared in the dark, with all of his heavy sadness. When he looks around and sees me, all that fright and hurt goes out of his eyes. I don’t care whether anyone believes it or not. It’s the truth. I’ve seen it happen plenty of times. What’s the reason for that look in his eyes? No one should wake-up with that look in their eyes. What’s he done to deserve it? Why him? There’s not a single drop of his blood coursing through my veins and he’s got no more claim to me than anyone else in the world but he’s the one I’d choose to be my father if I could.

He taught me everything but it still didn’t prepare me for what happened at the end of the journey. When we finally made it to St. Mary’s in Salt Lake City, a thousand-to-one-chance, we were turned away. So long and good riddance. Don’t let the door hit you on the way out. That’s why we’re here. Where else were we supposed to go? We couldn’t go back to Boston.

You need papers to cross in and out of the QZs—papers we don’t have and can’t get. Tess was the one who took care of that stuff. Even if you had the right papers, they weren’t worth the material they were written on. You still had to bribe or blackmail the officials at the checkpoints. Like, if there was a stain on your papers, or they were ripped, or the soldier whose judgment held your destiny between life and death didn’t like the hang of your shoulders or the shape of your face, he’d kill you anyway. Your whole life’s weighed on a piece of paper. This is impossible. How can everything about you be written on a single sheet of paper?

Everything I’ve said so far I know as true facts but the facts get hazy once we arrived at St. Mary’s so I have to go by what Joel told me. See, I was knocked-out—anesthetized for surgery. I have very little recollection of anything. It felt exactly like waking-up from a dream and finding myself no longer in Salt Lake City, which wasn’t where I’d expected to wake-up at all. I came-to and
thought, ‘Where am I,’ ‘How’d I get here,’ and, ‘What happened?’ I looked around and I realized I was in the back seat of a pick-up truck. Joel was in the driver’s seat and we were headed toward Jackson.

That’s not how it was supposed to happen. I was supposed to wake-up in Salt Lake City with a big party in my honor, with doctors and pathologists shaking my hand and hugging me, telling me I’d saved the world from an incurable deadly pandemic. Instead, Joel told me the Fireflies had already found dozens like me who were immune and they stopped looking for a cure, which is why they turned us away. Why would they stop looking for a cure? It doesn’t make any sense. I made him swear it was the truth and he swore it was the truth. I made him do this because I heard insincerity and duplicity in his voice, and I saw a suspicious flicker in his eyes. I know I saw this. But no matter how desperately I’ve tried to think of any other scenario, my mind can’t take such an atrocious leap to put anything else together.

At first, I was numb. When the feeling started coming back, I was flooded with bitter disappointment. How couldn’t I be? When I was put under, the surgeons hadn’t done anything to me. They hadn’t even cut into me. But when I woke-up in the backseat of the pick-up truck, I felt altered, like a vital part of me had been removed. It’s got nothing to do with my ego. I was naïve. I naively believed a power greater than me coursed my blood with the promise of goodness, and I could’ve spared future generations the dread and darkness of night. I figured we did a great honorable deed and made a great sacrifice. Well, it’s too late now. I thought someone special like me only came along once-in-a lifetime. Maybe there won’t be another one like me in a hundred more years and by then, it’ll be too late.

I can’t get mad at Joel. He deserves a lot of credit for keeping me safe on such a long tough journey. I was straight out of boarding school and ready to see the big wide world. He showed it to me. He lost his own daughter when she was around my age so he looks after me like I’m his own child. He’s been good to me. I don’t know how I can ever repay him for his protection so I try to be good and listen to him, and do what he asks but I’m sixteen and everything hits me hard. I hate it out here but I suck it up for him. I suppose we’re here because Tommy’s the only living link to Sarah and that must bring him great comfort.

Before I forget—about that scar. I found myself rubbing it constantly. It ached. I don’t know if I was imagining it but it gave me a lot of pain to think about it. I kept turning away from it. I didn’t want a reminder of our failure. I didn’t want to ever think about it again. So I got rid of it. During my first week here, under Joel’s consent, Gold grafted it smooth with his steady scalpel. Joel didn’t give me any pushback. I told him I was entitled to look normal like everyone else. I told him I wanted to change back to when I was normal, and he was like, “Then we’ll change it.” I’m thankful to never see it again, no longer condemned to carry the telltale scar to the grave.
Cold lunch in the mess. Beans and smoked cutthroat trout. I hate both of these things but wasting food is anathema and eating is opportunity. I sit alone in Z Club. I face the door like Joel does so he can always see who’s coming and going. I wrap the trout into a rag to give to Buckley, the Ark’s mixed-breed dog. I love dogs. I can’t think of a time when I didn’t love them. As much as I don’t like it here, I can’t deny the small miracles. I’ve eaten things I haven’t eaten since Boston. Or ever. Milk, bread, honey, butter, bacon. The options are endless.

The triangle bell clangs brightly. Zetas rise, and swing totes and backpacks over their shoulders. I reflexively search for mine but I keep forgetting it’s in my cell, stashed under my bunk. I’m not allowed to carry it in the common areas until further notice. It’s not that I didn’t think anyone would notice the kitchen knives disappearing after my daily cooking lessons. I couldn’t help myself. They were just sitting there, free as you please, so I took them without thinking anyone would notice. Well, they did. Of course they did. Nothing goes unnoticed here. My pack was seized and emptied till they found the pilfered steel boning knives. They also found my switchblade-stiletto knife and my .380 ACP double-stacked pistol that Joel had given me in Pittsburg. ‘In case I run into a bear,’ I said to hard-lined eyes and downturned mouths.

They confiscated everything. No weapons permitted for girls under twenty-one or boys under sixteen. I hated every second of being weaponless. Could you imagine? What’s the harm in letting me keep my little gun and knife? It’s no match against the assault rifles and submachine guns of the Deltas. We should be allowed to use long guns as soon as we’re strong enough to hold them. The sooner we learn to shoot, the better.

A couple nights later, I got lucky. The night the Cresskill riders came with torches, stampeded the horses, and set fire to the sedge. I watched from the powerhouse windows as the Tau men ran out of the family dorm with their pillowcases soaked in water. They smothered-out the flames while the Deltas corralled the stampeding horses. I didn’t watch for long because I used the diversion to slip past the armory’s unlocked doors, and steal back my knife and pistol with a couple .380 ACP high-capacity and regular-sized magazines. I hid everything in a shallow cavity beneath my bunk carved-out with my knife, decoyed beneath a linoleum tile.

I pull to my feet and trail the Zetas to a small classroom at the powerhouse rear where Father Crane stands at a lectern and drones from his Bible. I doze against the far wall until he dismisses us. I follow the Zetas back to the dorm for mandatory bed-down chores. Stuff like unfurling mosquito nets and cleaning-out bedpans. With the turbine generators and lowboys offline the past couple days, there’s more to prepare such as trimming the beeswax candles, and replenishing the lanterns with stinking rendered tallow and corn oil.

Our dorm’s the absolute worst in the powerhouse because we have zero privacy. The Deltas have privacy. Their dorm’s a network of small cells with bedsheets and makeshift doors over the entrances. Some of the cells are small and single, like Joel’s, and some are larger with two sets of bunk beds, but they all have privacy. Zetas aren’t afforded privacy. Our dorm is one big long room with fifty bunks arranged in five long rows of ten. Everyone’s got a single bunk with a mattress and a locker. A bedpan and a lantern. That’s the whole set-up. That’s it. The girls who’ve been here longer have a small chair next to their bunk where they hang their extra clothes. We have a dour corporal, Miss Cheever, who lives in a small broom closet across the hallway. She’s responsible
for our needs and the cleanliness of our dorm with twice-weekly inspections. It has to be done. Vermin and pests, you know.

After bed-down chores, I always get the hell out of Zeta till the dinner bells, like right now. I wander the grounds with my lunch leftovers, searching for Buckley. Anyone would think I’m crazy for doing this because people hate dogs. Could you imagine hating dogs? People hate them because they think they’re viral vectors. There’s a lot of dumb superstitions and misunderstandings about cordyceps, a dreaded virus. It’s not well-understood. People think the virus can stick around in someone’s immune system for years even if they don’t show signs of infection. They think animals are carriers and incubators because they bite. Like, say you’re playing around with a dog and you accidentally get bit. Even if the animal doesn’t show signs of infection, and even if you don’t show signs of infection, they think the virus remains in your blood and can come out at any time. How dumb is that? No one has pets because of this. Everyone’s distrustful and fearful of animals. Especially the bitey ones like cats and dogs. Even smart people believe this. It’s just the way it goes. People kill dogs and cats like you kill vermin. They argue they could become infected. A dead dog can’t get infected. You can’t argue with these kinds of people. Don’t even waste your breath. Just wish them the same fate as the animals they toss into the rivers.

I head toward the Ark and cut through the substation switchyard where Buckley sometimes naps. It’s a nice quiet place for a dog to nap because no one ever comes here. Why would they? The ugly dusty square’s crowded with squat transformers, circuit breakers, and a small brick control house. Tommy uses it as his command post, which is exactly where I find Buckley, napping against a side wall. Who’s a good boy? Who’s a good Buckley? He wags his tail and thumps his paws at the sound of my voice, skittering to his feet. I pull the smoked trout from my pocket and slap his haunches as he devours it.

No matter how terrible I’ve behaved or how horrible I feel about myself, Buckley always reminds me of my goodness. I feel like you’re born either good or bad. If you’re born good, nothing in this world can make you truly go bad. But if you’re born bad, well, forget it, you’ll never be good. It’s just the way of the world. I feel like I was born good to a bad world. I believe deep down, Buckley can see my innate goodness. He knows I’m a good person even though I rebel loudly against authority and rules, I’m utterly disobedient, and I refuse to mix with others. I know my flaws. I don’t have to be reminded.

I’ve never felt the pure-hearted unconditional love of a parent or a guardian. I search for love and acceptance everywhere, and when I feel rejection, it crushes me. I wish someone would just say, ‘I love you, Ellie,’ but I’ll never hear those words from anyone in my life. Definitely not from Joel. Joel cares for me. He shows a deep sense of responsibility toward me but he’ll never tell me he loves me because he doesn’t love things. He only loves his dead daughter and I suppose dead Tess, and that’s all the room he has in his heart for love in this world.

Something very unfair happened to him, and his best approximation of love is an unflagging sense of duty and responsibility toward me. If I disappeared from the face of the earth, I suppose he’d be relieved to no longer be burdened with my care. Jackson would be happy to have the extra bunk and my extra mess ration. It’s strange to think someone would be thankful you’re dead but what’s the use of trying to figure it out? It is what it is. I can’t change anyone’s mind or change how anyone feels about me.

I hear footfalls approaching. The footfalls of a man walking in purposeful strides. Even before I see who it is, I know it’s Tommy. Between meals and chores, he comes here. To his command post. Everyone knows this. Even I know this.

“Are you in the habit of feeding someone else’s dog?” he asks as he comes into earshot.
He thinks the worst of me but who could blame him? “I didn’t wanna bother Langley,” I say.

“Most folks’ll generally ask before interfering with other folks’ property.” He swings down his shotgun and stamps the stock to his thigh, the steel barrel aiming the heavens. “I’mma tell you what. After you’re done making a fuss over that dog, come to the CP. I’m wanting a word with you.”

“Am I in trouble?” I ask, my pulse rising. I already know the answer to this.

“You will be if you don’t come right quick.” He digs his keys from his pocket and heads inside. I hear the sounds of him settling into his office, a large room lined in wall-to-wall control panels, shelving, and an L-shaped banquette desk that takes up the whole front. I pull to my feet, brush the dirt from my knees, and go find him.

Shoulders drooped forward, he perches the edge of his desk with one leg dangling and the other resting on the floor. One hand rests over his idle leg while his other plays with the double-stacked magazine of his .45 pistol. He looks at me with a steady level gaze and tells me to shut the door so I swing it shut. He tells me to bolt it. I slide the heavy bolt into its socket.

“Let’s get started,” he says.

“On what?” I ask.

“Your punishment.”

The color drains from my face. “You can’t do it. I won’t let you.”

“Try me,” he says and looks at me with cold hard clear eyes.

My legs tremble, poised for flight. Stay out of trouble, obey Tommy, and listen to Joel. His word’s final, his instruction’s indisputable, and his authority’s supreme. If I apologize, maybe he’ll let me go with a warning. I’ll tell him I’m sorry, show deep remorse, and promise it’ll never happen again.

“I’m waiting, Ellie.” He beckons me forward.

His military web belt lays loosely coiled on the desk at his side. “Are you gonna punish me with that?” I ask, my voice catching in my throat.

“I am, Ellie. I am.” He lifts the belt by its brass buckle and runs his hand down the length of it.

I exhale brightly. I don’t like what he’s doing. “I’ve been thinking about what I’ve done and I wanna apologize.”

“It ain’t coming off like that.”

I make my posture and voice contrite. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry ain’t gonna cut it. Shuck-off your sneakers and jeans.”

“It won’t happen again. I promise.”

“If you don’t take them off, I’mma do it myself.”

My pulse pounds my throat dry. I’ve never learned the rules that govern a man’s hands when they’re not engaged in hunting, working, or murdering. I’ve never been spanked. This wasn’t a
thing in Boston. No one got spanked. If they did, no one talked about it.

“I ain’t in a mood to be trifled with,” he says, his voice truculent and beyond argument. “Let’s get this over with.”

I think about this for a moment. If I continue to disobey him, it’ll only get worse. Since he told me he was going to punish me, my anxiety’s grown more acute every single day, anticipating what and when and where and how it was going to happen. I was practically peeing my pants in anticipation. Well, now I know and I’m almost relieved. Glad it’s coming and wishing it were over. The truth is, I came here figuring he’d be around. Part of me was hoping to run into him to get it over with.

Fact is, everyone here gets spanked. They all get it. Disobedience is dealt with strictly. Everyone knows the rules, and what they can and can’t get away with. They know what happens when they cross the line. Most of the guardians here are former military or fifth column soldiers who were trained with years of discipline and they stand for no nonsense. There’s no such thing as delinquent children, only delinquent parents, they say. I’ve seen the Vale kids bragging about being beaten by heavy hands, lifting-up their skirts or pulling down their pants to show-off big ugly red blisters across the backs of their thighs and asses, showing them off like trophies. ‘My old man gave me a dozen with his belt!’ ‘My mom gave me twenty with her brush!’ The kids who aren’t spanked are looked down upon as being too prim and proper. Imagine that.

Now it’s my turn. It’s come for me. No point in protesting. He’s going to punish me anyway. No use putting it off any longer. I’ll make it quick and get it over with. How bad could it really be? Maybe it’ll purge me of my hatred for myself. Maybe it’ll drive something out of me. All those rebellious thoughts. Maybe this is the way it has to be for bad girls like me who don’t listen and can’t obey the rules. Maybe I just need to accept it.

I hate being indecisive. Choose, stupid! I choose. I take off my shoes and my jeans. I do this delicately because it feels so awkward. I pull down my jeans and I’m overcome by embarrassment at the state of my panties. What a sight. Stained and shrunken with frayed elastic, scavenged from the cast-off bins. Why should I care? Drifting with Joel, I never had a single thought about my underwear. I was happy enough to have a pair.

I stand with my eyes to the floor and my hands crossed over my thighs. He tells me to tuck the back of my t-shirt into my underwear waistband so I do it. I tug at the seat of my panties trying to cover my ass cheeks with as much fabric as possible. My anxiety’s acute. This is real. This is happening. Maybe there’s still a way out of this. “Tommy, maybe we could just—”

“Any more back talk’s an extra lash,” he says, interrupting me. “Up and over.” He pats his right thigh. I go over to him and stand at his right side. Just as I’m wondering how I’m going to climb across his lap, he slides a hand against my belly and leads me over his thighs. I grab onto his legs to hold myself up from the floor, blood rushing to my head. I clench my backside and thighs together till my knees touch.

“Legs apart,” he says.

“I can’t—”

“One extra lash!” he yells. “Spread ‘em!”

I cringe and spread my legs, pushing-up on my toes.

“Bottom higher,” he says. “Up. Lift up.” He hoists-up my bottom till it’s pointing to the sky. I flinch as I feel his fingers slip below my underwear waistband. He tugs my panties up my hips till
the seat nestles deep into the valley between my ass cheeks, exposing more flesh. My face flushes warm. Look at me. Slung over a grown man’s lap, half-naked, about to be spanked. I can’t process any of this. I hear his belt buckle scrape over the desk and I stop thinking about anything else. He holds the buckle in his hand and doubles the belt into two lengths. His other hand holds me firmly down by my far shoulder. I take a deep breath, trembling in apprehension.

Crack! The belt lands squarely over the fleshiest crest of my bottom. I jerk-up my head and surge against him, grunting, telling myself not to shriek. Don’t give him the satisfaction of knowing it hurts. This pain is bearable, I think to myself. A split-second later, the bite blazes across my bottom and I make a little whimpering sound.

Crack! The second lash falls quicker and lower, stinging the fleshy underside of each ass cheek. I wince, choke back a cry, and squirm my bottom, straining up on my toes.

Crack! The third lash splatters hard and fast across the delicate tops of my thighs. I hiss sharply, jerking my bottom from side-to-side. I feel the skin on my thighs tightening, and my underwear bunching-up between my ass cheeks, the elastic nipping into my skin.

Crack! The fourth lash bites hard across the same tender spot. A bright flame shoots across my backside and I shriek. I have to do this. I kick out a leg, bucking wildly. “Tommy, stop!” I yell, my voice choked in panic. “You’re hurting me!”

“You’ll get a dozen more if you don’t keep quiet and lay still!” he yells. I reach toward my backside to massage-away the maddening sting. He grabs my arm and locks it to the small of my back. “Ain’t you hearing me, child?” he asks, his voice a graved threat.

“Stop!” I yell, fighting against him. “Lemme go!”

“Six more! On your bare skin.”

I gasp and tremble. “No, Tommy! Please, not that!”

“If you ain’t gonna pay no mind, I’ma try something else.” He shoves my t-shirt down to my shoulders, and I go very quiet and still. I feel his fingers slip below my underwear waistband, which feels like the worst thing in the world, knowing what he’s about to do. He slowly rolls them down, resting them below each cheek before sliding them down to my ankles. My face flares deep heat, my shame acute.

He wraps an arm around my waist and holds me tightly against himself. It feels like there’s a stone or something hard in his lap, prodding into my belly. I gasp, realizing it’s his cock. My stomach jitters an unsettling mix of fear, shame, confusion, and arousal. I start to imagine what his cock looks like and I feel that ache fire-up between my legs. I clench my thighs together and feel nothing but slicked up heat and wetness.

“Relax,” he says. “It’ll hurt less.” Crack! I yelp as the lash cuts across the fleshiest crests of my ass cheeks. I wince and strain up on the tips of my toes in agony. I draw-in my ass cheeks, my whole body shuddering.

Crack! His belt comes down heavier and swifter, biting into the same tortured spot. I wail torment and thrash over his lap, clenching and unclenching my ass cheeks.

“Keep ‘em spread!” he yells, and flicks the belt across the backs of my thighs in warning. I spread my legs wide and clutch at him in a death grip.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack! He lashes me in quick succession along the backs of my thighs, and
the crests and undersides of my ass cheeks. My bottom rises and falls with each stroke, my hips bucking over the bulge of his cock.

Crack! A cruel swift lash spatters the undersides of my ass cheeks, cutting deep. I howl and whip my hips from side to side, wailing as fresh bright pain courses through my body. “Stop, Tommy!” I yell. “Please, stop! I can’t take anymore!”

He tosses down his belt, the buckle clanging stridently to the floor. He holds me firmly over his lap, one arm slung around my waist and the other across the back of my tender tortured thighs. I sob sloppily against his leg, his 5.11s wet with my tears. Deep burning fire radiates my backside. My twat aches maddeningly. A maddening ache that feels unstable, like it could erupt if someone breathed on me the wrong way. I draw my legs together and feel them slippery in wetness practically down to my knees. I’ve soaked his whole lap beneath me. It must look like I pissed myself. It must look like he pissed himself, too. He’ll have to change his pants before he leaves, I think to myself.

I try to make sense of this wonderfully horrible thing that just happened but all I can think about is his nearness and closeness, and how much I want to be nearer and closer. The warmth and firmness of his muscles beneath me. I think about how I want him to take my legs, pull them wide apart, and take a good look at how shiny, pink, and wet I am. Look at my tight pink asshole and my shiny pink twat, and watch what happens when he sees it. I’ll have to carry this maddening ache between my legs until tonight. Until lights out, laid on my bunk, where I’ll go over this whole thing in my head. I’ll spread myself wide open with one hand and poke my fingers between my legs with the other. Just as I start picturing this, I feel his hand close around the top of my thigh, right beneath my ass cheek. His fingers curl around my thigh, so close to where I need them.

I clutch at his pants and pull myself closer to him so he can’t push me off his lap. Not that he wants to. I know this because he pushes his cock into my belly. I press myself against it. I feel his whole body beneath me, heavy with impatience. I can’t keep still, either. I push-up on my toes and start moving my hips like I’m slowly fucking him, pushing against him, urging myself toward his fingers. I make soft pleased sounds and slowly fuck myself over his lap, begging him silently to slip his fingers inside me and play with me. I want him to do this. I’m dying for this. My soft pleased sounds grow more urgent and breathless.

I hear his breath come quicker and brighter, like he’s running a marathon. There’s not an ounce of fat on him, and his muscles bulge through the cut of his clothes, but he’s breathing like that, like he’s short of breath. I squeeze myself against his fingers and glance up at him. I have to do this. Dare him to fuck his finger into me. He watches me with glassy eyes and a steady level gaze. His cock twitches beneath my belly. I feel the heat and the heft of it, and it feels dangerous and thrilling.

“How are you sorry now?” he asks, his voice hoarse and thick in his throat. He starts moving his hips with mine, like we’re slowly fucking each other. I lay down my head against his leg and clutch at him, trying to pull him as close as possible. I feel his fingers slipping toward the lips of my twat and I go very, very quiet. I can only think about how good this feels and how much I want to be fucked by him. By his fingers. By his cock. Whatever he wants to stuff inside me as long as it’s him.

“You think about what you’ve done,” he says, his voice breathless as he slowly fucks himself against me. “Remember what’ll happen if you do it again.”

I gasp as I feel his fingers slipping against the lips of my twat. I urge myself against his hand. He pushes the tip of his finger inside me. I make a little sound like a squeal. It’s a very tight fit but it
slips in easily, slippery in my wetness. He pushes his finger a tiny bit deeper, and I rub myself back and forth against it. It’s enough to make me come, and I start to come. I reach behind my ass and squeeze his hand between my thighs, pulling myself down against him, coming and coming.
Chapter Seven

After dinner if you want to find me, I’m always in Joel’s cell. Night is when we talk. When we drifted, he didn’t like me to speak during the day. He said he needed to listen to keep us safe. He said I talked so much, sometimes he felt like he was drifting with a dozen people instead of one little girl. Sometimes I woke-up to his hand hovering right above my mouth ready to clasp it shut. Fact is, he was afraid of my mouth and what could come out of it. So I had to save everything up for nighttime when we bedded-down, and only if we had a safe shelter or the protection of a cooking fire. I had to keep all my questions and observations to myself all day. By nighttime, I felt like everything was going to burst out of me.

I sit in a greasy upholstered armchair at the foot of his steel single bunk. Chairs are special. Chairs are for church, mess, and the infirmary. The first night I found the chair in his cell, he gestured to it and was like, ‘That there’s to lay your head if things haven’t gone just right, to catch a wink or two. You don’t have to explain to me none. I’ve got nothing to do with your coming and going.’ And that was that.

I knew he bartered the chair because he didn’t want me on his bunk. He didn’t tell me this. He didn’t have to. He wanted to make it clear we could never ever bed-down together like we did when we were drifting. Sleeping together wasn’t something we did out of intimacy, affection, loneliness, or tenderness. We did it for safety. We had to. If we were lucky enough to have a single blanket or towel, we had to share it. In cold weather, we had to keep a slim silhouette or else we’d be buried overnight by frozen sleet and snow. He had very strict rules for sleeping. We could only sleep face to face, shoulder to shoulder, or back to back, and always with our arsenal laid between our bodies. Our arsenal was a physical line not to cross, and we never did. Why would we?

He stands with his back to me, hulking his small steel desk. He’s field-stripping his rifle under the soft light of a hurricane lamp, the scope and screws laid on rags aside his .45 semi-automatic pistol and his .357 Magnum revolver. Not that any of them needed to be cleaned. His guns are always polished and pristine. He field-strips them out of a sense of duty. Rubbing and oiling and greasing and polishing. His hands are never idle.

Sometimes I’ll stand at his side and watch him or I’ll archive his ammo. He taught me everything about unloading firearms. Bolts disassembled from barrels and triggers from actions. He says it doesn’t matter how many bullets your gun can fire per minute if it doesn’t fire when needed. He never begrudges the necessary labor to do something proper and says if it’s done right the first time, you only have to do it once.

Beyond his partition, Deltas banter over card games and dominoes, and Zetas flirt and laugh. Most of the Delta boots have Zeta girlfriends. People marry compulsively out here. Younger and younger, clinging to each other to chase away the loneliness. Know what I think? I think people get married to make something feel permanent in a world that’s already dead. A desperate attempt at permanence. To pin down a future that won’t last very long.

I’m not interested in any of the Deltas. Some of them are so rural that despite having good solid bunks, they drag their mattresses to the floor, the only place they know how to sleep. Some of them have backwoods accents so thick, I ask Joel to translate them for me. Sometimes when they try to talk to me, I nod my head, yes, to be polite even if I have no idea what they're saying. They
probably think I’m dumb or crazy. I don’t care. I don’t want anything to do with any of them, anyway.

Joel doesn’t mix with them, either. He has very little to say to them and takes no part in their gossip. He’s not evasive or impersonal. He’s just private. He lives among them quietly and unobtrusively. Something in his authoritative manner holds them off. I think they’re puzzled by the uncertainty of his character and his intimidating manner. If anyone needs him and asks him for help, he’s there for them, no doubt about it. But he won’t interfere or impose himself. He keeps his distance.

The smell of solvent fogs my head. Beyond the cathedral windows of the airy double-volume hall, clotted stars pinpoint the sky. I shift my sore bottom against the seat cushion. The redness is gone but the mix of stimulation, excitement, bewilderment, and confusion remains. Too much has happened too quickly to figure it all out. I can still smell Tommy on me. Metallic, dust, and dirt. I can still feel him beneath me. His warm thighs, his rippling muscles, and his cock pushing into my belly. I can still hear the drive of his belt as it bit into my flesh and the sound concussing the walls. His fingers slipping below my underwear waistband and tickling my thighs as he drew them down my legs. His clear blue alert eyes watching me as I slowly fucked myself against his hand.

After I came, I felt his hand fumbling around his lap, followed by the rasp of his zipper and a little lift of his hips. I didn’t dare look. I couldn’t, afraid of what I’d see. Then I felt it bob against me. Warm, hard, and thick. I smelled it. Musky and sour but in a good way. He held it in his hand and pushed it against my thigh. He rubbed it against me. It made me feel wanted. Dominated. He started moving his hips like he was slowly fucking me and I could feel his hand playing with himself. I held onto him tight as his hips lifted higher and higher, and his hand worked his cock like he was trying to strangle the life out of it. I knew he was about to come when I heard him go very quiet. Then he got very loud again and I felt cockfuls of warm thick come spreading over my ass cheek. He wiped the head of his cock around in it as he came, slippery, thick, and warm. This actually happened to me. Nothing like this has ever happened to me. I grew-up thinking these things could never happen to anyone like me. You never know where lightning is going to strike, do you?

I wondered if Tommy felt it, too. When I heard him breathing like he was running a marathon, I figured he did. And when he came, I understood he did. Why does it feel so different with him? And why now? Joel’s also a man but it’s not the same thing at all. I know Joel’s good looking. You can’t deny it. Anyone could see it plainly themselves. His clothes sit well on his big muscular body and his face is handsome. He has a straight nose, a strong jaw, and deep-set clear brown eyes. His short thick wavy hair’s always boyishly tousled. It’s more brown than black with a touch of gray at the temples, and he wears his beard short and thick. He’s strong, tall, and virile, and he can shoot and hunt better than anyone I know. His sportsmanlike manner makes it impossible for anyone to dislike him. But Joel’s Joel. Do you see what I’m trying to say?

Things have changed and they’ll never be the same ever again. I feel like someone completely different than the girl who woke up this morning in her bunk. Different than the girl who left Boston two years ago. I don’t know exactly what it is. I’ve experienced ordinary things in my life —hunger, pain, loneliness, and fear. What happened with Tommy isn’t one of those ordinary things. It’s left a deep impression on me. It’s the first time a man’s hands have touched me like that. I’m thrilled by a new sense of secrecy and maturity. It’s like I was asleep this whole time and I just woke-up, like I was seeing the world through a dreamy haze.

In Boston, I was always told what to do. I never felt alive. No one around me felt alive, either. Everyone was cut from the same cloth. It felt like acting, like going through the motions. I couldn’t feel anything and I didn’t want to feel anything. We moved around the halls of the academy but
there was nowhere to go. We thought we were free. We weren’t. I always roamed the halls. Looking for what, I don’t know. Everything felt empty and meaningless. Here everything feels real and raw. Here I feel real things.

I needed the spanking. Needed to feel the strain of hard muscles holding me down, needed a physical outlet for my rage, anger, and passion that only the contact of a strong rival could give me. I want drama in my life and when I don’t find it, I have to make it myself. I know this deeply and I know it’s troublesome. I’m desperate to connect with someone, even if they’re dangerous.

This is a big change in me. For as long as I can remember, I’ve always hated to be touched. It wasn’t that I was uptight or prude. I just didn’t like feeling people’s hands on me or their bodies too close to mine. It wasn’t something I could control. I figured I was born like that, like knowing how you don’t like the taste of spoiled milk, rancid butter, or cabbage. I didn’t like feeling a man’s dirty smelly rough sweaty hands on my skin. I didn’t really understand it myself. I just know I didn’t like the feeling. I shrank away from people touching me, especially men. I didn’t want to be under a man’s control. Until now. All I can think about are Tommy’s hands on me. I want to feel his strong hands all over me. Touching my belly and feeling-up my ass, pinching my thighs and squeezing my breasts. He doesn’t even have enough hands for what I want him to do to me.

I never even wanted to get married because there was so much uncertainty about the whole thing. What would it mean for someone to be married to me who could never touch me and how would it make them feel? I imagine they’d feel very confused. Could you imagine breaking your partner’s heart when they tried to touch you and you shrank away from them? I knew I could fall in love with someone and spend my life with them but how do you do those things without touching them? I knew being with someone would mean a lot of fighting about those things, or someone thinking they could soften me or break me if they were just convincing enough.

Joel hates to be touched, too. It’s really hard to get close to him. It’s different with him, though. It’s not a physical thing. You feel like he goes away for a bit and then he comes back. Not physically but in his head. The point is, he’ll never let you get close enough to touch him. He always keeps a distance. If he can’t do it physically, he does it mentally. He pushes you off.

I hear his voice echoing in memory, calling my name.

“Yeah?” I ask him, dazed. He always says I’ve got my head in the clouds. Sometimes I worry he thinks I’m dumb or lazy. I’m just distracted. I’m always daydreaming.

“Ain’t you hearing me?” he asks. “I asked, how’s Gold?”

“You know he’s the same age as you?” I ask.

“I hadn’t even noticed.”

“Know what he says about you?”

“No business of mine.”

“He says you were born an artist and raised an outlaw. He says your artistic impulses were strangled-out at birth. You’re a high thinker who lives low.”

He laughs good-naturedly and wipes away reloading powder from his rifle. “Still telling fables about Hollywood high life?”

“Why fables?” I ask.
“His stories are about as clear as mud. The past is tricky. What should’ve been and what really happened get all mixed up. No memory survives without its spell, not even voices.” He unscrews the breech bolt sleeve from the bolt and extracts the firing pin. “How’s the Ark?”

“Hens are laying. Sixty-a-day.”

“The greatest layers you’ve ever seen.” He pushes solvent-soaked rags through the bore. “What else are they filling your head with?”

“Latin,” I say and flash the cover of an unopened book in my lap, one of Gold’s Latin primers. “Gold’s idea. He says a mastery of language opens every door.”

“Not if you’ve got a shiv,” he laughs. “How’s Scripture?”

“Proverbs.”

“They’ve got their merits.”

“We should be learning how to get through this life, not the next. What’s the point?”

“Wisdom from the old and the wise to the young and the dumb.”

“I can’t tell the righteous from the wicked.”

“Virtues always take care of themselves. This kinda life’ll quickly teach you your sins.”

“It’s been over twenty years,” I say.

“Some gotta figure out where they’re going when the past’s done,” he says. “Existence ain’t a straight line. Even the straightest and narrowest path’s gotta lotta crooked little points.” He daubs the firing pin with oil and polishes the barrel. “There’s little comfort left in this world. Civilization’s been set back centuries. Man passes from one trouble to the next. He conquered everything but himself. Took for his own gain and greed, and never returned a goddamn thing—never even intended to. Borrowed on credit he didn’t have, polluted nature, and planted nothing to heal it.”

I braid the fringes of a rough wool multi-stripe blanket thrown over the chair. I really want to talk to him but what do I want to say? I want to ask him a lot of things I know he doesn’t want to hear. I want to ask him if he’s happy here but I can’t use that word with him. **Happy.** He doesn’t believe in it. I swear he flinches when he hears that word. If he could erase one word from the human language, it’d be happy. I suppose he’d use the word **content** instead but that’s not nearly the same thing, is it? If he ever feels happiness, he feels it for a fleeting moment and braces for what’s coming next. The next tragedy, the next trespass, the next trouble.

Here’s what’s bothering me. Joel and I always had a common purpose. Something worth fighting for, bound by threads woven tight in great suffering and hardship. Drifting to Salt Lake City for a vaccine and a cure. Now that it’s no longer our goal, all he wants is an ordinary life. This fills me with anxiety and dread.

I wonder how long we’ll stay here. I figure it can’t be long. Joel hates belonging to anyone or anything. He’s rebellious. Always wandering. It’s good enough for him to always be moving forward. It doesn’t matter the reason. I suppose anyone else would be happy to settle down after so many years drifting but I have bigger dreams. I want to visit faraway places and exotic lands. I don’t want to be hidden behind the walls of some rural frontier settlement in the middle of nowhere for the rest of my life. Even the Bible talks about exotic spices and colorful silks. The Bible—the
most boring book in the world! A million years ago they had these beautiful exciting things. Where are they now?

The thing about me and Joel is, we’re just so different. I see life one way and he sees it another. It’s as simple as that. He’s very Old World. Conventional and one-dimensional. He’s interested in only two things: keeping his load-out pristine and mourning the dead people he loves. Very few, if any, people can touch him in life. He sticks to his small routine with its predictable walls. His Program. It’s a safe existence and it’s too dull for me. I need to feel free. I have a terrific sense of independence. I can’t be pinned down. I want adventure. Seeing and trying new things. I’ve always been this way and I imagine I always will be. Life’s a risk. Every day you wake-up, you take a gamble. I want to take a risk on everything. I know it’s a lot to ask but what else do I have to look forward to?

There must be other settlements like this but bigger and better. Mysterious ports and faraway lands with precious things I’ve never seen or tasted or smelled, or felt against my skin. What happened today with Tommy was a loud urgent reminder that the world’s bigger than I thought. So much to do and see, and not enough time to do it all. You see, I always wanted to travel. I always felt it deep in my blood. A restlessness. I want to see the whole world before I leave it. I saw some of it but I want to see it all.

Yes, it’s nice here. Yes, I’m safe here. Yes, I’m well-fed here. Anyone in Boston would be like, ‘Are you crazy? How could you like it out there in the country? Big smelly horses and big smelly men. Snakes and wolves and all kinds of wild animals trying to kill you. A sun that bakes you till your skin peels-off. No, sir!’

I can’t see why this place would possibly suit me. I want a life. I want to go somewhere I’m free. I want to think what I want without people trying to force their ways on me. Some people seek happiness but I seek freedom. To always feel free. I want to see how things work in other places before I settle into a rural life. Here I can only see myself doing chores, raking chicken shit, toiling in the mud, and chopping firewood till I’m forced to marry some dumb beefy Delta and bear his dumb beefy children. What kind of life’s that?

I’m afraid I’ll die before I get the chance to live independently. I’m only sixteen. I’ve done nothing and gone nowhere. I dream about making a difference in the world. I dream about doing great things. Becoming someone. I dream about being loved in the way I deserve to be loved and to give that love back to the person who deserves it. Finding someone I care deeply about, who I can love. Someone to make love to me, and I don’t mean degrading sex demanded by a manipulative partner, like, make-up sex after a bad argument. There hasn’t been any of anything. I’m scared I’ll die suddenly and none of it’ll happen at all. I’ll die and there won’t be anything left.

Joel’s my only hope of journeying to far-off places and doing big exciting things. I’m too weak, small, and let’s face it, dumb, to do it alone. I’m scared of being abandoned by him because I know I’m not strong enough or smart enough to live the life I want outside of his protection. I saw the world outside of Jackson through him. I saw how cruel and tough it was, and how easy it was to get lost and fall into danger. Now that we’re living in captivity, the world feels very small.

“Hey,” I say. “Can I ask you something?”

He leans against the desk and wipes his hands with a rag. He searches my face with guarded eyes. He knows from the look on my face and the tone of my voice I’m going to be confrontational. He knows this. He’s never eager to get drawn into these kinds of conversations with me. Well, here it comes. “What’s gonna happen to us?” I ask. “After this.”

His shoulders droop forward. He bridges his fingers to his temples. “A man gets awful tired of
hearing this,” he says and looks at me askance. “There’s no after. This is your home. It’s where we belong. No more drifting.”

“But you always said we’ve gotta keep moving. Traction. The quick and the dead.”

“I done told you. We’re safe here. They ain’t even matters that need discussing.”

“I just thought—”

“I don’t know what you thought and I don’t care what you thought.”

“But I wanna talk about it.”

“You’re bothering me.”

“What’d I do?”

He throws the rag onto his desk and bridges his hips, his face drawn in exhaustion under sallow candlelight.

I swan my head and pick at my ripped jeans. I’ve exasperated him, worn out his patience. I’d take it back but since he never apologizes for his own actions, he doesn’t accept apologies from anyone else.

He crosses the cell and sits heavily on his bunk with his boots square to the floor. “You know I’ve never been the type of man to let things go halfway so let’s get to an understanding here, yeah? By the grace of God, and my steady nerves and vigilance, I got us here past danger at every turn. For my sake and for the sake of the others who died keeping you alive, you’ve gotta move on. This is the best I can do and the best it’s ever gonna get.”

“But there’s gotta be something better out there,” I say.

“What more do you want?” he yells. The back of his neck starts to turn red.

“I don’t know,” I say, my voice soft, trying to diffuse his anger. “There’s gotta be other settlements out there. Like this but bigger and better. We can make our own.”

“You want your own plot of land in this godforsaken world?” he yells, incredulous. “Grubbing around in the mud? Raising cabbage and turnips and dandelions? Rotting away behind your own fences? This is a place for us! There ain’t nothing for you or me beyond them walls. Get that through your head.” He rises from his bunk and stands at his desk with his back toward me.

I swallow my tears. Why do I always push him like this? He’s all I’ve got in this world. Often mistaken for father and daughter, I’ve never felt the absence of a sibling or a parent because he’s always felt like kin. One devoted responsible parent’s much better than two badly matched absentee ones, you know. He’s the only constant steady male voice in my life. He’s a titan of strength, stature, wisdom, and know-how.

Before him, I was grateful to be an orphan—a delinquent—savage and unadoptable. No one was obligated to feed, clothe, or shelter me. I was born without debt to the world and was responsible for no one but myself. I didn’t matter to anyone or anything. I was free from the paralyzing fear of losing loved ones and debilitating emotional ties. I had no allegiances and no responsibilities.

When we were fanning it to Salt Lake City, I was scared most of the time. I was scared of dying before I reached the hospital. I was only thinking about getting there alive. Halfway there, I
realized I wasn’t as afraid of dying as much as Joel dying first or ditching me, or being separated from him. I figured I could deal with death but I couldn’t deal with him not being there. I pictured this in my head. Waking-up and looking at the spot where I last saw him fall asleep, and him not being there. I’d wander around the wilderness shouting, ‘Joel! Joel! Come back! Please, come back!’ and hear nothing but the silence come back at me. I’d sob his name, walking this earth searching for him, wondering what’d happened to him.

At first, I didn’t care about him. It could’ve been anyone else taking me across the country, you know? He was just some ornery old man who kept yelling at me. He’d say things like, ‘No, Ellie, don’t do it that-a-way. Do it this-a-way.’ But I started to notice when I pulled my weight, he looked at me differently. I saw something different in his eyes when he looked at me. Awe, maybe. Respect. Pride. I don’t care if anyone believes me or not. It happened. I wanted to become the kind of person who’d make him proud. I try so hard to be good for him because I couldn’t bear being apart from him. At this point, I’ve been around him too long. I care about him too much.

I understand people come into your life and they go away. Lots of times it’s as thoughtless as opening and closing a door. Coming and going. Going and coming. I imagine it’s like how those big train stations and airports worked in the Old World. People coming and going through a big station, and getting on a plane or a train without a second thought. When Joel came into my life, I started thinking, here’s someone who I hope sticks around. I haven’t felt that way with many people in my life. I really hope he stays.
“Back when labor had its opulent rewards,” Gold says, “we lived in a house of pristine simplicity that cost a fortune.” He glances at me over the tops of his playing cards faded in age, its four suits barely distinguishable in his delicate clean hands. “We lit candles for ambience.”

The first thing to know about Gold is that he talks like someone who’s read books his whole life so he talks like someone straight out of a book. You understand this after a minute of talking to him. When I call him out on it, he always says something like, ‘Ellie, you live through your words. The better language you can use, the better you’ll be able to evaluate the expressions of others.’

We sit at a low table in the infirmary rear outside the operating theater, converted from an airy tiled bathroom suite. Eve tends to patients laid flat in communal bunks with stainless-steel IV poles.

“We had Italian sports cars that were heard before they were seen,” he says. “Know how much they’d be worth today?”

How should I know? I’m still undecided if his stories glittered with California gold are fiction or exaggeration but I listen rapturously.

“One fucking cigarette,” he laughs. “Not even a single bullet for the whole fleet. Obsolete and worthless in a barter economy, unashed from the wheel of commerce and the industries that fueled revolutions. In the L.A. QZ, I bought an orange from a pregnant woman for two safety pins. They were rationed one-a-week. I ate it like an apple, skin and all.”

“Was it worth it?” I ask.

“I never tasted anything so good,” he says with a reminiscent smile. “The last canned food were sardines and condensed milk. I still get nauseous thinking about it. You had good sense being born in the Post World. It’s like a shattered mirror with millions of shards scattered across the universe. Each fragment’s someone else’s nightmare and each splinter takes the world further away from its whole. Your privilege is having no measure of exactly how incoherent the world’s become, like being born before mirrors existed. Before politeness was duty and time was money. Cleanliness was next to godliness and human life was valuable.”

“Was it like that everywhere, for everyone?” I ask.

“More or less.”

“Far away, like Europe?”

He nods his head, yes.

“Think they’re all dead?”

“How could they be?”

I already knew the answer to this but I always ask him anyway. His family’s from Israel. He believes without a doubt they’re still alive. He said every home, apartment, and public building had
bomb shelters. If anyone would’ve been prepared, it would’ve been them.

Gold’s the only Jew I’ve ever met. He knows scripture better than Father Crane. He’s got a whole collection of prayer books embossed in gold-leaf locked in a cabinet. On his religion’s holy days, he reads these books by candlelight turned to the East, the direction of their holiest temple, his lips moving soundlessly and his body rocking rhythmically. He says Joel’s namesake’s one of the twelve minor prophets, with writings full of apocalyptic prophecies. Fires, pillars of smoke, the sun and stars extinguished, and the moon red and heavy with blood.

He’s one of the only people I’ve ever met who’s not shocked by the Critical. He said his people have been persecuted to the brink of extinction since the beginning of time, and the more you know about history, the more you recognize it’s cyclical. It’s always been this way if you know history. One race hates another so much, they consider it a blessing to kill each other. History’s shown it. Mankind always survives.

“Israel had military muscle,” he says. “In the malls, the supermarkets, the parks, and on the beaches—feline soldiers with Uzis and kepahs, bronzed to perfection. In Jerusalem, the Jews, Muslims, Armenians, and Christians all lived in Old City quarters connected by ancient gates. Four diverse cultures praying to diverse gods in diverse languages, eating diverse food dictated by diverse calendars, governed by diverse laws, living on the same street—and hating one another! And that was before the New Millennials existed.”

“I’ve never actually seen one,” I say.

“Men after God’s own heart.”

“Do you believe in it?”

“Deliverance?” he asks.

“Deliverance.”

“Gabriel blew his trumpet, and Sodom and Gomorrah burned fire and brimstone. God willing we’ll both be here in a couple decades to find out. They’ve still got another twenty years wandering from Egypt to Jordan till they find it. ‘A little child shall lead them.’”

“Into the Promise Land?” I ask.

“New Jerusalem. God’s New Kingdom.”

“Where Jesus is waiting?”

“Handing out crowns of righteousness. The day of all days. Menageries of wild beasts, living, laying, and eating together in golden pastures, just like Genesis promised. ‘Of such is the Kingdom of God.’”

“Why don’t you go over there and look yourself?” I ask.

“Vacations are over,” he says in a tone of voice like it explains everything.

“What’s vacations?” I ask. I know the word, I just don’t know what he means here.

“A break from work. Travel for pleasure. Before civilization fractured, the world was small. Four corners knitted together by road, sea, air, and rail. Now it’s vast and boundless, needs to be tied-up to halt extinction, an inevitable hiccup over hundreds of thousands of years. Century in, century
“Everyone did vacations?” I ask.

“We did. Every couple months. France for silk ties, Switzerland for mechanical watches, Germany for fountain pens, and Italy for bespoke suits. God makes, the tailor shapes.” He fingers the frayed collar of his button-down dress shirt. Starched, bleached, and pressed immaculate. He dresses like how the men looked in the old magazines.

“I’ve gotten used to the off-the-rack cast-offs,” he says, “but I miss the music.” His eyes waver into the middle distance. “A live orchestra. Burnished strings, mellow woodwinds. Opera openings and afterhours with maestros and divas. The divas were ripe, dressed like they were constantly in heat. An undertow of sex attached itself to everything. Perfumed, powdered, and polished. Red lipstick matched to impeccable manicures, glossy coiffures, and fur coats lined in the palest silks, embellished with hand-sewn pearls and crystals. Under their arms they carried miniature purebreds, small as squirrels, in hand-loomed cashmere sweaters trimmed with fur. It was like a gathering of swans. Elegant tailleur designed for candlelight, star mist, and glittering chandeliers.” He sobers and runs his critical eyes over me. “Sooner or later you’ll have to find that female voice. Find balance from the Deltas. You can’t go to Joel for everything.”

“Sure I can,” I say.

“It’s not his job. Not mine, either. I’m glad you have him. He’s a survivor—it’s his strongest instinct. He’s well-equipped for the wild country out there. No one but him could’ve survived alone in that great wasteland. He protects what he has but he’s plagued by past fears. Too many regrets. He’s fatalistic.”

“What’s fatalistic?” I ask.

“Resigned to his fate. He thinks everything’s predetermined and inevitable.”

“He’s been through a lot,” I say.

“We all have,” he says, his voice clipped and caustic.

I drop my eyes. I know Gold’s story and it’s not something you want to hear. He was skiing with his husband in Jackson Hole at the inception of the Post World, which is why he was out here. You always think you’ve gone through the worst thing in the world until you hear someone else’s troubles.

“Made any new friends?” he asks.

“I don’t need friends,” I say.

“Everyone needs friends. Someone who gives you the best of themselves. Loyal and reliable, they keep their word, and when you need them the most, they’re there for you.”

“Someone to let into my life and die?”

“So you’ll never let anyone get close to you ever again? Keep strangers as strangers?”

Friends. How many friends does one need? Someone who’ll drop their whole life for you to come save yours. How many people like that come along in a lifetime? Not many. You’re lucky to find one. No one else is worth keeping around. What’d be the point of staying attached to so many worthless people? Fact is, you can live without friends. You can live without love. Back in the Old
World, you could probably live without money. Who knows? You only need food, water, oxygen, and shelter to survive. This is a fact.

“But you always let someone in,” he says, “because it’s not easy to be alone, is it?”

“I’ve got you. And Joel.”

“You spend too much time around us. One day you’ll wake-up and find yourself an old woman with your youth long gone. You need to be around young people. Friends your own age. Zetas.”

I groan disgust. Zeta implies grooming, dating, and breeding. An introduction to the manners and customs I’m condemned to occupy for life but I feel no different than a boy. I have no desire for the responsibilities of being a woman. Courtship, marriage, pregnancy, childbirth, parenthood, and homemaking. Gold says it’s still on the spectrum I haven’t gotten my period, says I’m too thin, but I pray it never comes. I don’t want to turn into a soft thick matronly woman. I don’t want kids or the pressure to have them. I never intended on bringing innocent kids into this mess of a world. The risk of abusing and neglecting them. I feel like I’m a curse on people. I worry there’s evil in me or the relatives I never knew and I’ll pass it on. So many times in my life I wish I’d never been born. My bloodline ends with me.

It’s not that I don’t like kids. I’m just not cut out for looking after them day and night. I like the idea of having a family and my own home but it doesn’t mean a husband and kids to me. I can’t imagine living day after day, stuck in a house, caring for them. Cleaning their clothes, cleaning their furniture, cleaning their messes, and cooking their meals. I like the idea of living together with someone far away from here. A big adventure. Entertaining friends. Preparing exotic things for them called puffs, soufflés, and mousses. Hot seafood and mixed cocktails. I want a woman’s role in life without being tied down as a wife and a mother. I don’t think it’s too much to ask.

The problem is, there are very old fashioned roles here. Primitive and elaborate. It’s considered selfish not to have kids. A biological necessity. Preservation of the species, you know, especially when the parents are young. They think every growing child demands the continuous support and presence of two parents. The mother to suckle the baby, and the father to hunt and protect them. Women have excess children to make sure a couple of them survive into adulthood. Pregnant women and childbearing girls are protected like fragile pieces of precious china. The Vale women are totally insular because they concentrate solely on their homes and children. They take no interest in the outside world. There are no single unmarried mothers aside from widows who found themselves thrust into that situation against their will. Unmarried mothers would be outcasts. They’d be seen as cheap and promiscuous. Low and degraded. Stupid girls who didn’t know any better. Girls who should’ve listened. Girls to be scorned or pitied.

Living around so many other girls, I’m constantly being measured up to them. Am I more or less feminine than them? The thing is, I never questioned my femininity till I got here. It held no value to me. The point was survival. Nothing mattered as long as I survived. I’m not like the other girls here. I see them and I know I’m different. They’re fond of children and can’t wait to have their own. They’re skilled with household chores, flirtatious with men, and keen on sex. They collect clothes, wear make-up, and are more involved with the care and attention of the men in their lives than themselves. I hate the qualities of the women I’m supposed to embody. Bitchiness, fragility, and tenderness. I know little about being seductive, passionate, modest, or frivolous. I admire women who are strong, resilient, and loyal. I want to be more flexible and fluid than the old rigid patterns followed here. I don’t want to have to conform to the conventional rules. I want to be my true self without being labeled. It’ll never happen as long as I live here, as long as I live among the Zetas.
“Why can’t I live here with you?” I ask.

He laughs and continues talking like he hadn’t heard me. “You haven’t connected with anyone?”

“I’m not like them.”

“No one knows but me and the Millers.”

“It’s not that,” I say. He means my immunity. My bite. I trace the skin over my forearm where he grafted it smooth and tight.

“So what’s the problem?” he asks.

“They make me feel like I don’t like anything I’m supposed to like.”

“You can’t hold it against them—it’s their birthright. One is what one was born to be.”

Joel and I’ve been through a lot together. We hunted and we were hunted. We were afraid and miserable together. Zetas know nothing of that. They’ve never heard the bellows of wounded men left to bleed-out in ditches, their faces black and loud with flies. Cars trickling black blood from what’d been someone’s child or mother. I saw these things and I’ll never forget them. “I have Joel,” I say.

“What if something happens to him?” Gold asks.

“Nothing’s gonna happen to him.” Nothing can happen to Joel. I won’t even think about it. He’s the last man standing.

“Between you and him?” he asks. “Nowhere to turn, no one to talk to?”

“I’ll talk to myself,” I say.

“But you and I talk. For hours and hours on end.”

He’s right. I hate being alone. I hate solitude and isolation. All of its emptiness and the unsettling silence. I hate being alone with my thoughts. I have nothing to think about but the things I fear, like being abandoned and alone. Literally being alone, anticipating being alone, and remembering my past loneliness. Rejection, abandonment, and isolation. Fear of getting old, fat, and useless, I suppose. Of never finding someone to love or someone to love me. Of losing love once I find it. Of being betrayed by the person I love. Of my inability to connect and communicate with others. Being alone makes me feel insignificant and supremely lonely, reminds me I’m unable to express myself, how I feel, or how to conceal what I want to hide. All my graces are trapped within. I know they exist but I don’t know how to give them agency. My thoughts are under-developed, immature, intense, obsessive, and demand to be communicated. I’m always fighting my emotions. “Can I ask you something?” I ask him.

“Anything,” he says.

“Do you think I’m pretty?”

“One should know these things without asking.”

I drop my eyes. I wasn’t expecting this answer from him. I always wanted to ask him because I can’t ask anyone else in the world. I always thought he’d say something like, ‘Ellie, you’re the most beautiful girl born on this earth,’ even if I’d been born with my nose on my chin or three eyes
in the middle of my forehead.

“It’s not the length of your nose or the shape of your chin that makes you beautiful,” he says.
“What the world sees is completely up to you.”

“What’s the world see when it looks at me?” I ask.

“Real beauty comes from within.”

“Within where?”

“When you keep things in disarray, everything shows so badly, sometimes it’s hard to see the virtues it might possess.”

So much double talk. None of these things are answers. I wish he’d say what he meant. He should’ve been a man of religion or a philosopher—a priest or a rabbi or a poet—talking in riddles like this. I figure I’m hideous and he’s too polite to tell me.

He tweaks a phantom cufflink at his wrist. “In my time, beauty was radiance. Lustrous hair, pristine teeth, a soft voice, and harmonious features. Intelligence, grace, and elegance. Those measures no longer exist. They haven’t existed for a long time, gone with wealth, occupation, social order, formalities of dress, manners, etiquette, and polite conversation. Artifacts. This kind of rough hard life weighs performance, not appearance, on merit and worth. Classification’s founded on character, not beauty.”

“I don’t get it,” I say. Either I’m pretty or I’m ugly. It’s as simple as that.

“You will,” he says. “One day you will. True beauty doesn’t announce itself when it walks into a room. It’ll slip right by if you’re not looking for it. It’s up to you to find it.”
Chapter Nine

I sit on the scabbed floor of a powerhouse classroom. Father Crane drones scripture. I’m surrounded by bored listless Zetas who doze on-and-off or braid each other’s hair below dusty shafts of late afternoon sun. Some idly doodle on smooth polished slates with pieces of shaped limestone. It’s the only cool thing about lessons. You can clean the slates with your own spit when you’re done and not get in trouble for spitting.

Every time my mind wanders, I fantasize about being spanked by everyone, everywhere, and that maddening ache fires-up between my thighs. It’s driving me crazy. I’ll have to carry it till lights out when I can rub it out in my own bunk, thinking about being licked and fucked in all the wet warm pink places between my legs. I’m already dying for lights out, dying to be fucked. I start imagining tonight’s fantasy…

Summertime, early Sunday morning. Long before the guard mount bells. Jackson hasn’t woken-up yet. I’ve broken juvenile curfew laws by sneaking out of Zeta for a tranquil sunrise swim. I left under a big full moon flooding the powerhouse halls with soft silver light, and snuck past the night time guard duty crew, both sentry and prowlers.

I’m in the large boat shed at the Great Lake reservoir with its peaked wood-beamed ceiling. I sit cross-legged in the shallow cockpit of one of the thirteen-foot sailing dinghies, pretending I’ve hijacked it and I’m charting the savage untamed seas to the great beyond.

Beyond the walls fitted with long workbenches, fog lifts off the lake, undisturbed and glassy. A pre-dawn veil of wispy mist casts everything monochromatic grey. A lone robin sings its first sweet song before daybreak. My muscles are elastic and toned from the brisk morning swim. My damp bikini sticks to my cooled skin, and my damp hair hangs long past my shoulders.

The robin’s song stops abruptly. Low serious baritone voices converge behind the big wooden doors. Tommy and Joel’s voices—and they’re calling my name. My limbs lighten in alarm and my forehead breaks-out in a cold sweat. It can only mean one thing. My absence’s been noted and the Deltas have been summoned for search patrol. No one ever pays attention to me until I’m gone!

The doors swing open to Tommy and Joel, kitted-up for search patrol. Fighting load carrier vests and assault rifles dangling one-point slings. I scrunch down into the cockpit, trying to make myself as inconspicuous as possible but it’s too shallow. No use. Nowhere to hide. I can tell by their hurried rushed manner and serious voices they’re not in a good mood. Why would they be? No one wants to be woken-up in alarm. Woken-up for search patrol. Joel, your damn girl’s run-off again. Can’t you do something about it? Well, have you tried tying her to the bed? I’m sure I’ve given him a good scare. He probably pictured the worst thing happening to me in his head—being carried off by wolves or drowning in the lake or mislaying my step and falling off a cliff.

Tommy swings the shed doors shut and drops the big securing plank into the bracket. Joel sweeps
the room with his rifle, the barrel kissing his cheek. He spots me. Our eyes connect, wide and distressed. He barks my name like he’s spitting-out garbage and orders me not to move a muscle. He strides down the center aisle toward me, cutting past rows of mast-down dinghies.

I flag my hands in surrender, and beg for clemency and forgiveness. What’s the big deal, I think to myself. I was safe in here the whole time. With an injured roar, he rips me from the cockpit and shoves me down on my belly against the cold concrete floor. He grinds down my thrashing hips and wallops my bottom a dozen times, striking the fleshiest crests of my ass cheeks over my bikini with a soft cupped palm. I squirm beneath his hand without uttering a sound aside from a couple grunts. It doesn’t hurt. His blows are weak and ineffective. It’s just a gesture to show his brother he’s capable of parental-like authority. He’d never hurt me. He doesn’t have it in him.

When the spanking’s over, I sit doe-like on the floor with my legs tucked against my backside. I massage the gentle sting from my bottom. He menaces over me, catching his breath. Outwardly he’s furious but inwardly, he’s exhausted and soft. I know him too well. “Don’t you ever do that again, you hear me?” he yells, his neck corded and swollen, and his nose snarled. “Don’t you dare try that again!”

I know he’s not angry because he never shouts in anger. The less he understands, the louder he yells. I probably should’ve wiggled around a bit and begged him to stop to make him feel like a big man, to make his punishment feel worthwhile. I don’t blame him for spanking me. I broke the rules and I was caught breaking them. More power to his hand and his arm. I need to be shown right from wrong. How else am I supposed to learn?

He straightens his rigging, digs around his hair, and grooms his beard with the back of his hand. Tommy looks on with steady level eyes. Silence hangs uncomfortably. The air’s charged with tension. Tommy sneers at his brother, his disgust palpable.

Joel addresses him. “Something bothering you, Tommy?”

“You’re goddamn right,” Tommy says, his voice scornful. “When you’re done preening, you punish her proper. Let her go on thinking you’re a man.”

“It’s plenty enough,” Joel says.

“You didn’t even leave a mark on her.”

“She didn’t mean no harm.”

“Sneaking-off like that?” Tommy asks.

“She was here the whole time,” Joel says.

“Folks are generally punished for what they do, not for what they attempted to do.”

“She just gave us a little scare, is all.”

“A little scare?” Tommy says, his voice mocking. “You said you were gonna tear down this whole damned settlement till you found her!”

Joel grates the hair at the back of his head. “I reckon I was running a bit wild.”

“Well, she ain’t getting away with it. She’s gotta pay the price. And if she does it again, she gets the same.”
“The same of what?” Joel asks.

“A taste of my strap’ll cure her of her recklessness.” He unhitches his web belt, whisks it through his 5.11s, and offers it to Joel. He wants Joel to belt me!

Joel scoffs, rebuffing him. He won’t take the belt. “She’s too old to get belted, Tommy, too old to be spanked over a knee.”

“I ain’t caring how old she is. She broke the law. The punishment fits the crime.”

“And what crime do you reckon on charging her with?” Joel asks.

“Breaking juvenile curfew laws.”

“And you intend to tan her hide for that?”

“That’s the intention.”

“Whose intention?”

“Mine,” Tommy says and glances in the direction of the powerhouse. “All of us. That’s the law and she was caught breaking it.”

“You’ve got no right here,” Joel says.

Tommy laughs. “Then I reckon you’ll be awful fussed-up when you remember who’s representing the law around here! The name’s Miller. Tommy Miller.” He thumps his chest for emphasis. “And Tommy Miller’s the Justice of the Peace of Jackson. The wheels of law and order have been set into motion. I’mma give her the thrashing she deserves.”

“You ain’t thrashing her, Tommy.”

“Whether she’s punished by the law or the man who upholds the law don’t make a lick of difference. She’s still gonna get punished all the same.”

“Damn your law!” Joel yells. “You ain’t doing it, Tommy. I’m telling you!”

For a long silent moment, they stare at each other, watchful and alert with cold hostile eyes, their jaws thrust forward and their muscles straining with reflexive readiness.

Tommy’s eyes flash belligerence. “If she were my own daughter,” he says, “I would’ve tanned her hide a dozen times already.”

“Then have your own and do as you please,” Joel says.

“You don’t know the first thing about raising-up a child, yeah? Never had time to grow-up yourself, being a father at such a young age.”

Joel’s muscles gather up for action. His eyes glitter malice. If you value your life, don’t mention Sarah. Everyone knows this about Joel. Tommy knows this. He’s trying to work him up to a fight. Tommy continues to taunt him. “Drop-out dad. Your principles are busted, your pride’s long gone, and your authority’s run dry. You raised your kin without paying no mind, figured as long as you worked hard to feed, clothe, and shelter them, you were fulfilling your duties. You’re a disgrace!”

Joel growls thunder and grabs Tommy’s chest kit, pulling him into a tight struggle and upsetting his balance. They stagger wildly, locked in a violent embrace, grunting in effort, their limbs tensed
and straining. The only sound is the sharp whistle of their breath, and the scraping and thumping of
their boots over the concrete floor.

Tommy grabs the back of Joel’s head, wrenches it downward, and steps-in close as he drives a
knee hard and fast into his groin, roaring defiantly. Joel bellows and drops to his knees. He bridges
over the ground, grunting and clutching his crotch, his face pale and drawn in pain.

Tommy shoves his bangs from his forehead. He watches his brother writhe in agony with scornful
malice in his eyes. “When you play with fire,” he says, “you oughta be more careful.”

Joel pulls stiffly from the ground and readjusts himself, wincing.

“I’mma let you off with a warning,” Tommy says to him. “The next time you shove your nose into
my business, I’mma break it proper. Just you wait. Don’t interfere with the Justice of the Peace.
They elected me with the authority to preserve and protect law and order, and I’ve got a reputation
to uphold. Now, I’ve done all I could and you know where I stand. You let her have her way too
much. She’s trying to drag her old Boston ways out here, trying to make-over ours. Can’t say I
didn’t try to warn you. One day you’ll figure it out when it’s already too late.”

He looks at me directly, the sweep of his chin aggressive and determined. “I’mma give it to you
straight, Ellie,” he says. “You went looking for trouble and you found it. I’mma lay down some
law and it’s gonna be obeyed. I’mma beat some discipline into you, teach you a lesson you won’t
ever forget.”

My blood ices and a cold sweat breaks-out over my upper lip. He pulls me from the floor and
shoves me toward the wall. I stumble and catch myself against it.

“Hands flat against the wall!” he yells. I do what he tells me. I feel him come behind me, the heat
radiating off his body. “You trusted the wrong man, yeah? You were a fool to put your faith in
Joel. I’mma put you wise to it. He ain’t on the level. He can’t be trusted. He ain’t your kind and he
ain’t the kind you think he is. I’m sorry I’ve gotta tell you this but I feel you oughta know who
you’re dealing with. Now, I’ve tried to show you. Tell you things straight-up so there’d be no
misunderstandings. I tried to be patient but your foolish principles don’t run deep enough or sound
enough for a place where law’s been established.”

I feel his fingers slip beneath my bikini strap. “You don’t need to be wearing this,” he says. He
eases it from my shoulder. “None of this.”

“Please don’t, Tommy,” I beg. “I’ll be good. I promise.”

“Behave like a disobedient child and you’ll get treated like one.” My bikini top slips away, and my
breasts sit free and loose against my chest. He slips his fingers past my bikini bottoms waistband
and tugs them up my hips, drawing the fabric deep into the valley between my ass cheeks. He
squeezes a cheek and runs a knifed hand along the cleft between them. He slowly rolls my bikini
bottoms down, passing them over each cheek.

I clench my thighs together and whimper. “You’re gonna do it, aren’t you?” I ask.

“Not if you’ve been good,” he says.

“You’re gonna do it. I know you are.”

He makes me lift each leg as he works my bikini bottoms past my feet, my face flushing warm in
embarrassment. I sense him walking away so I turn to look. He walks to the far end of the room
and sits on the bow of one of the dinghies. “I’m waiting, Ellie,” he calls across the distance and
pats his lap.

“Are you gonna use your belt on me?” I ask.

“You know better than to ask me that.” He pulls up his belt and fondles the length of it. “I’mma thrash you till my arm’s sore.”

My mouth goes dry. “But I don’t need to be punished.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

I whimper. “I don’t wanna be belted.”

“You make trouble and get into it, you take your punishment like a big girl.”

“I’m sorry for running off.”

“You’ll be sorrier if you don’t get over here.”

I turn to Joel for help. Our eyes connect and he drops his. Coward, I yell at him silently. Dishonorable and weak, cowed before his younger brother. Unwilling to protect me from Tommy’s wrath. His docility disgusts me. “Are you just gonna stand there?” I yell at him.

He doesn’t respond.

“Joel! You can’t let him do it! Do something!”

“My hands are tied, Ellie,” he says. “When the Justice of the Peace catches folks breaking the law, he’s got every right to do some punishing.”

Tommy laughs loud and free. “Y’all can call me Your Honor!” he yells at us across the room.

“You’re afraid of him!” I yell at Joel.

“Dead center!” Tommy laughs to himself.

“It’s not like that,” Joel says. “I ain’t taking chances. When a man goes quiet after being wild, it doesn’t pay to mess around with him. He keeps his temper hidden deep down inside and it makes it even worse when he’s crossed. I reckon it’s been coming-on for a long time.” He cuffs me by the neck. “Be sensible, child. Ain’t no use fighting the law.”

“But you’re supposed to protect me!”

“Whatever game he’s running, I ain’t interfering—and I don’t advise you to, either.”

He leads me across the shed toward his brother. I drag against him and whine. “Joel, please don’t let him do it!”

“Obey Tommy,” he says and delivers me to his brother. “His word’s the law.”
Chapter Ten

Tommy slips his hand against my belly and leads me over his lap till my bottom crests his right knee. “I’llma teach you what it’s like to have a real man’s discipline,” he says. “Man-sized discipline. You’ll be sleeping ass-up for a week when I’m through with you.” He starts to lead my chest down over the hull and I resist.

“Wait!” I yell. “No more running-off. I promise.”

“No more back talk,” he says.

“But—”

“You want an extra lash?”

“No!”

“Two extra! Hands flat on the hull.” He shoves me down against the hull, my nipples turning to ice against the cold smooth fiberglass. He presses against my lower back with the flat of his hand. “Dip your hips.”

I jut-out my hips and arch my backside, everything pink and wet between my legs exposed to him and Joel, who stands in front of us and watches-on with steady level eyes. My whole face blushes deeper.

“Not too hard, Tommy,” Joel says.

“Don’t get to worrying, brother,” Tommy says. “I reckon I’ve sized her up right. Any girl who doesn’t wanna be strapped would’ve kicked or screamed her way outta it by now, yeah? Reckon she didn’t ‘cause deep down she knows she needs what she’s getting.” He addresses me directly. “I’llma really thrash you this time, child. Beat you till you show some remorse.” He holds me firmly over his lap by my far shoulder. I draw a deep breath, my muscles rigid, and my whole body tensed and straining.

Smack! I expected his belt but it’s his hand. Flesh-on-flesh. He smacks me with his warm open palm, striking firmly across the plumpest part of my bottom. I gasp, lifting my head and jerking-up my hips. My ass warms immediately from the skin-on-skin contact.

Smack! His palm comes down on the opposite cheek in the same plump spot, my flesh jiggling beneath his fingers. An intense burn radiates deep heat between my thighs, everything slicked and aching. Below my belly, his cock twitches. He spanks me a couple dozen more times from just below my waist to the under-curve of each ass cheek. I gasp and thrust up my bottom to meet his hand with every slap, bouncing over his lap.

Smack! His hand comes down squarely across my ass cheeks, the hardest yet. His fingers skate across my twat, drawing-out wetness and trailing it across my skin. Waves of glowing heat radiate from cheek to cheek, igniting my whole body in a deep steady burn. The fiberglass hull below me feels incandescent against my bare skin. He cups a glowing red ass cheek and it practically disappears beneath his whole hand. I urge against him and he gently massages it. I start making
little pleased noises and he stops. I gasp and scissor my legs, unable to hold myself still. He wraps
an arm around my waist and draws me closer. “I hope you liked the first part ‘cause here comes the

Fresh fear lifts my scalp. Fabric rustles and his belt buckle drags over the hull. He pulls it into his
hand and doubles it over into a loop. I clench my legs tightly together. He tosses back an arm and
the belt whisks ominously through the air.

Crack! The first lash rips across the center of my bottom, falling hard and heavy. I yelp. An intense
flash of fresh pain bites my flesh, followed by a dull ache and a burning heat. I quiver over his lap
and kick-out a leg in protest.

Crack! The second lash comes quicker and harder, landing across the leanest crest of my backside.
I shriek, my bottom clenching and shuddering. I reach down a hand to massage-away the sting. He
grabs my arm and leads it back over the hull. “That’s an extra lash,” he says. “Take them good and
there won’t be the need for no more.” I buck and wail, begging him to stop. Mid-struggle, he
addresses Joel. “A little help?”

Joel answers his brother’s call. He straddles the hull in front of me and sits. He draws my arms
beneath his bottom, scoots forward, and pins them against the hull. I fight against him but it’s no
use. He’s too strong. I give up and lay my head in his lap, my nose pressing against the hard bulge
of his cock.

Tommy’s belt swings down, measured and heavy, as it splatters my tender skin. He lashes me a
dozen more times, pausing half-a-minute between each stroke. I shriek and surge over him,
buckling and thrashing, my head tossing from side-to-side in Joel’s lap. I kick-out my legs and
thrust my bottom higher and higher with each stroke.

The final lash bites brutally across the toned lean tops of my thighs. I howl in agony. A stinging
vibrant flame sears my whole bottom in fresh waves of torment. I thrash wildly, fighting against
Joel’s restraint, begging Tommy to stop. He tosses down his belt and says, “You stay put, you
hear? You stay put and think about what you’ve done.”

I sob plaintively into Joel’s lap. I feel his hand on my head, pushing back my hair from my
forehead, trying to comfort me. I clench and unclench my ass cheeks, sweaty and inflamed in heat.
Tommy cups one and massages it, easing away the bright edge of pain.

Joel’s cock twitches beneath his khakis. He makes a breathless little moan. I look up at him and his
face is creased hopeless. He works his lips soundlessly, the words dying in his mouth in gasps. He
doesn’t have to speak for me to know what he wants. I want it, too. He lifts his bottom from the
hull, freeing my arms. I touch his legs and feel-up his thighs, digging around for his cock. I slip my
hand into his fly and pull it out, finding him already hard enough to fuck. I wrap my fingers around
it and he exhales brightly. He digs at my hair and pulls it back from my face. He wants to see
everything.

I hear the rasp of Tommy’s zipper and I feel him draw out his cock from his fly. He takes it in his
hand and pushes it against my ass cheek. His other hand pokes between my legs and he plays with
me. I ooh and aah softly. He pushes a finger into my split and I feel myself slowly opening up
against it. He pushes it deeper and I swing my ass from side to side.

I press Joel’s cock against my cheek, letting my hair fall over it, tickling it. I dig into his bush,
sweaty and thick. Oh, that hair. All that dark thick soft hair. I run my fingers through it, tickling his
balls. I lay my head against it, feeling its softness against my cheek. His whole body’s on fire, his
thighs boiling hot. He sits halfway up from the hull like he’s about to jump out of his seat. He puts
one hand on the back of my head and the other closes around my own hand wrapped tightly around his cock. He begs me to suck it and starts leading down my head. ‘Put it in your mouth. Get it nice and wet.’ His voice is hurried and tense.

With his cock in my hand, I arch my head downward and kiss the full length, pushing my nose along the shaft and working toward his balls. He whimpers and continues to beg me to suck it. I know I’ve got him good so I tease him a bit more, digging at his thick bush. I slip a hand under his balls and hold them in my spread fingers, tickling them. He’s halfway up from the hull, gasping, impatient for me to take him into my mouth. I open up my mouth as wide as it’ll go and slip him in. He finally goes quiet. I hold the tip firmly between my lips and swirl it with my tongue. He makes little gasps of pleasure. I slip his cock deeper into my mouth and hold it steady, swirling the tip.

Tommy plays with me while he plays with himself in his other hand. He slowly finger-fucks me, stuffing-in a couple fingers, stretching me wide open till I’m loose enough for his cock. I ooh and aah, my sighs muffled against Joel’s cock stuffed into my mouth. I’m dying to feel him explode in my mouth. I want him to come the first time in my mouth when his come’s the thickest and richest. I want to tease-out a flood of come from his balls. I pull him out of my mouth and he makes a little whimper. I take him in my slippery hand and push the head against my chin, licking and kissing and sucking. I lick his balls, running the end of my tongue behind them and down his thighs.

Tommy eases out his fingers. I whimper. No, Tommy, don’t stop, I beg him. Put them back in. Put them back in! He’s teasing me. He wants to hear me beg for his cock like Joel begged for my mouth. He pulls me closer and his hard rough chest rig presses against my soft skin. The sensation’s maddening.

He pulls away and I feel his lips brush against my ass cheek. He sucks and licks the wetness from my skin. He’s teasing me, torturing me, pretending he’s about to lick my twat but he keeps circling back to my thighs instead. I’m going crazy from frustration.

“E...e...e...easy there, Ellie,” Joel says, his words stuttered. “Easy.” He covers my hand with his own, wrapped around his cock in a death grip. He pries-off my fingers and leads my hand away. He probably thought I was trying to rip it off. He strokes himself in his own hand. I arch my head downward, and kiss and lick his fingers, and whatever parts of his cock and balls I can lick through his hand as he plays with himself.

Tommy kisses me squarely over my twat and slides his tongue over the lips. I coo and swing my thighs wider. His tongue slips in and I wail. He sucks me hard and brings out his tongue, dripping wet. Oh, God, what a feeling. I never want him to stop. I beg him to go deeper and suck harder. I spread my legs wider. I want to spread them open till I’m split in half. I never want to shut them again.

Joel digs his fingers through my hair and hands me his cock, urging me to take him back into my mouth, desperate for the warmth, softness, and wetness of my tongue. I take him in my hand, squeeze my fingers around him, and slip him into my mouth. I spiral the head with my tongue before slipping him deeper, inch by inch. My other hand finds his belt rigging. I pull at it, keeping myself down and as close to his cock as I can.

Tommy stuffs me with his tongue and sucks hard, twisting in and out. I urge myself against his face, and squeeze my thighs tight around his wet chin. The sound of his mouth licking and sucking and kissing my twat makes everything so much hotter. I slobber over Joel’s cock, my head bobbing in his lap. He can’t sit still. He starts urging himself against my face as I fuck him with my mouth. He fucks himself deeper till he buries himself halfway down my throat. I retch robustly, popping him out. Thick saliva courses my mouth and spills my chin. I wipe the slobber from my chin and
stroke his cock with it, slicked and burning in my slippery hand. I lick and suck the slobber from his balls. Tommy reams his tongue into me. He shoves-in a finger with his tongue and I howl.

I slip Joel’s cock back into my mouth and suck it to the back of my throat. Tommy fucks in another finger, and sucks and licks me everywhere his fingers aren’t stuffed into me. I feel Joel growing thicker, hotter, and harder in my mouth, his cock spreading itself everywhere. He bucks against my face, his balls slapping wetly against my chin. He doesn’t have to tell me he’s going to come. I know he is, and I am, too. Thick jets of come spray the back of my throat. Loads and loads of come, full of the taste of his cock. He starts to fill my mouth with come. I swallow and it goes straight down. I come against Tommy’s face, everything between my thighs slippery with my wetness. He’s about to come, too, stroking himself fiercely in one hand and stuffing his fingers deep inside me every time I cry out—
Father Crane slams his Bible against the lectern, rousing me from my fantasy. Lesson’s over. Through the open windows, the sound of boisterous men’s voices carries on the wind. I picture the Deltas playing football, soccer, or baseball on the large grassy field behind the powerhouse. I’ve never seen them play anything else.

I pull to my feet and shift my panties through my jeans, everything between my thighs slippery and aching. Why am I thinking these things about Tommy? About Joel? Tommy’s changed everything. I wonder if maybe I was born this way and he simply awakened it, like how your hair turns grey as you get older or how you start to laugh less and less.

I always figured I was too young to feel this way about anyone, too young to imagine these kinds of things. I thought I’d only feel it as an adult. I kissed a guy in Boston once. He grabbed my breast and squeezed it like he was milking a cow. He kissed me so hard, he split my lip. There was blood everywhere. I was terrified. When I stopped shaking, I told myself, first and last time. It made me realize men didn’t want to be loving with me. They wanted to violate me. After that, I never wanted to kiss anyone ever again, though I kissed my best friend the night she died. So what. I wonder what it’d feel like to kiss Tommy.

I tail a group of chattering Zetas toward the powerhouse rear. We follow the long fences hung with freshly-washed sleeping bags, poncho liners, and infirmary linens. Monday’s wash day. Rain, snow, or shine. The Tau women dampen, soap-up, and scrub everything down before it’s put into the copper vats to boil. Everything’s poured into large wooden tubs and beaten with bats made of Osage. Then they go back for another scrub and a final rinse before they’re hand wrung, and hung on lines and fencing to dry.

Behind the powerhouse, we run into a big group of Deltas and Tau men gathered-up for a game of football. The field’s been arranged into a gridiron by tinder tied with canvas strips. The men are stripped naked to their waists with their combat pants bloused to their knees. The ones with long hair rake it into messy topknots and low ponytails. They’re all bearded, from short stubble to bushy old-growth. Their chests are big, broad, and hairy. Even the shorter men are built big. Their bodies are deeply-tanned and scarred with slashes, burns, and keloids.

Zetas drop their packs and sit along the sidelines. I linger alone at the end zone among the men’s jettisoned load-out, rigging, and blouses. Buckley prances over, nuzzles into my pockets, and sits on his haunches, his tail whisking contentedly.

The backfield huddles around Tommy on quarterback, squared behind Coffey on center. The men knot into formation. Tommy takes the snap and arrows it to Joel on wide receiver. Football cushioned to his arm, he rushes past Patton on fullback, dodges left, swerves right, darts sharply, and dives to the ground. The men regroup. Tommy sails the ball to Coffey, and they push downfield till lines collapse and bodies tangle.

Above the commotion, I hear the faint beating of distant hooves carried on the wind. I swear I hear this sound but I can’t tell the direction it’s coming from. In my head, I picture the Ark’s livestock, which is the only thing that makes sense. Maybe they’ve stampeded the cedar-railed double corrals. Grat’s a decent farrier but he’s an idiot. He’s got long shaggy hair that looks like he cut it
himself with horse clippers and he probably did. He’s got big long teeth that make him look like one of his horses. Joel says I should respect peoples’ weirdness. He says everyone’s been through so much, it’s understandable they’d all end-up a bit odd.

The hoofbeats build and grow more distinct. I scan the wild rolling mountains beyond Jackson. Nothing—no movement, no dust. Nothing. See, this is why I don’t like living in the mountains. Mountains are where rebels and fifth columns set-up bases because the mountains keep you safe. There are a million places to hole-up and ambush. Even the biggest army in the world wouldn’t be able to search all of them. You can move freely during dry spells and leave no tracks, or hole-up for an entire season until the ground firms-up. Living out here, chances are you’ll run into them sooner or later.

I scan the crowds to see if anyone else notices the sound. No one notices and I start to feel foolish. Maybe I imagined it. Just as I convince myself it’s all in my head, my eye’s drawn to half-a-dozen unknown horsemen bursting through the scrub on the opposite shore, about a mile distant.

My scalp rises and my blood ices. Rebels? Fifth columns? The riders gallop in a single column over a small stony field backed into overlapping mountains. They make a hard left and break onto a wide grassy swale laid with clumps of long bunchgrass leading to the river. Heading straight for us. I lunge for an assault rifle, slap the stock to my shoulder, nestle my cheek against the barrel, and track the unknown riders as they approach. The powerhouse field erupts in chaos. Breathless shouting running men come to skidding halts all around me. They tear assault rifles, submachine guns, and pistols from the ground, and flank my sides with their weapons drawn to combat-ready.

Someone grabs my rifle by its carry handle and yanks it out of my hands. Even before I look, I know it’s Joel. No guns and no shooting guns, is what he always says when I mention guns. Without a word, he wrestles me firmly behind his back and shoves me to the ground where I fall softly on my ass. He wants me to join the other women and girls who’re running toward the powerhouse to seek cover. No way. I wouldn’t miss this for the world. Finally something’s happening!

Joel squares toward the strange riders with his rifle swung to combat-ready. Tommy flanks him with a drawn pistol. A pistol! I crawl up to Joel and peer at the riders from behind him. I touch his legs and his whole body’s rigid and stiff, his muscles gathered-up in anticipation. He tries to nudge me away with his foot but I cling to his legs until he finally gives-up.

Behind us, shouting gesticulating men stream from the powerhouse with assault rifles drawn to combat-ready. They clip-on utility belts stuffed with ammo pouches, their eyes blazed, and their faces hurried and tense. They advance and form a long line along the crest of the riverbank, some standing rigid and silent with their guns drawn, and others kneeling. No one does any shooting unless Tommy gives the word. The Delta marksmen team lays prone, intently tracking the unknown riders with their M110s as they draw-down to a walk. They halt at the head of the swale on the opposite bank. They stand their horses at the edge of the river and fan into a rudimentary semi-circle. The smell of horse sweat and leather drifts across the fifty-foot distance of water separating us from them.

The riders sit silent and straight in their saddles on tall common reddish-brown sorrel horses. The men are tall, broad, muscular, bearded, and deeply bronzed. Hard grim faces worn in cruel brutal lines broadcast menace and contempt. The muscles of their wide shoulders and thick necks bulge through their dark clothes and rigging. They’re heavily-armed with assault rifles, with additional long guns sheathed to their saddles. They look like a gang of rebels but they’re too well-fed, too clean, and too well-rested to be rebels. I suppose they’re Cresskills, judging by what I’ve heard about their inferior horses. Dog meat, the Deltas call them. Crow bait and plow animals.
In the center, their leader sits rigid in his saddle on a tall sorrel horse. His big hands are clenched around his rifle held horizontally across the pommel. He's middle-aged with coarse black wavy hair, a short thick black beard, and a heavy mustache with streaming ends. He wears a black Stetson on his large square head and battered black leather pants on his thick legs. He watches us with furtive aggressive dark eyes, his huge chin thrust forward past the bold sweep of his jaw. You can feel his antagonism. Look at this ornery sonofabitch, is what we’re all thinking.

Tommy draws his thumb and forefinger to his mouth, and spirits a whistle. His call to action. A distinct command. A sharp clear clarion tone he uses for all sorts of reasons. Let’s Go, Come’re, Get Going, Look Out, Step Aside, Look Here. You just have to read his face and his body language, and you’ll know exactly what he wants to say. This one says, Watch Me and Follow my Lead, Brothers. I want to learn how to whistle like that. I wonder if it’s something he’d ever teach me if I asked him. I wonder why I’m thinking about it at a time like this. I look up at him from behind Joel’s legs. His manner’s coldly composed. He’s in complete command.

“Steady there, brothers,” he says to the powerhouse men. “Don’t start nothing.” He speaks without bluster or nervousness, his manner radiating the calm confidence of a man who knows exactly what he’s doing. He turns his attention to the lead horseman and speaks. “Haven’t seen you in over a month, ain’t it? And now you pay us another visit.”

“Keeping track, yeah?” the lead horseman sneers.

Tommy continues, “You and your riders have been spending quite a bit of time gallivanting around the territory on those little brown horses of yours. Find what you’re looking for, Caden?”

“Nope,” Caden says, his voice thick and hoarse.

“Expect to?”

“I’m expecting to.”

“Mind telling me what you’re looking for?”

“Curious, yeah?” Caden asks.

“I might could be. Seen anything special?”

“Exploring,” Caden says, his manner indifferent.

“Just taking a look around the country? You and your riders out getting some fresh air?”

Caden doesn’t respond.

“What are you doing so far this way?” Tommy asks.

“Well, it’s like this,” Caden says. “Maybe you’ve heard what’s been happening lately. Folks have been telling me things.”

“So that’s what’s got you so fussed-up?” Tommy laughs. “Folks running their mouths?”

“I heard a rumor Tommy Miller’s sheltering a fugitive from justice.”

“What on earth’s your meaning?”

“There’s a story going around. A fugitive, wanted by the Fireflies. Something else’s going around, too. It’s been said he’s holed-up here. We ran into some hide hunters at the north tip of Arkwright
who said there’s a big price on his head. I’ve come to find out what you know about it.”

“Well thanks for letting me know,” Tommy says. “But I ain’t in the habit of listening to talk—”

Caden interrupts him. “Big talk—”

“Nor spreading gossip,” Tommy says, interrupting Caden.

“It’s been said he left Salt Lake City a couple months ago in a pick-up truck that didn’t belong to him,” Caden says, “and he’s running with—”

“Thanks all the same, fellas,” Tommy says, cutting him off. “But I put no faith in rumors.”

It’s clear Caden wants to rile-up Tommy to give him a reason to start something but it won’t work. Tommy’s got no reason to fight with him.

Caden bristles and pulls himself up full length in the saddle. “So that’s how it is, yeah?” he says.

“No, it ain’t,” Tommy says. “You’re trespassing on my land and you’ve got no right here, so let’s get this straight. If I were a Cresskill, I’d be mighty careful. I reckon it’d be a lot safer if y’all kept to shooting-off your mouths back at your own place.”

“If he’s hiding here, we’ll find out,” Caden says.

“You ain’t finding-out nothing and we ain’t saying nothing. Got any other ideas?”

“Plenty. And we intend to find them all out.”

“Save your threats. You’ll get plenty of them before you’re through.”

“We’re after a murderer and we mean to get him!” Caden yells.

“Ambush us and we’ll blow you to Hell.”

“We’ll try to accommodate you, Miller. Someday we’ll be coming back to see you again—”

Pack! A bullet fires from Tommy’s pistol and Caden’s Stetson lifts a couple inches from his head before settling back down. After the color returns to Caden’s face, he removes his Stetson from his head, dangles it in his hand, and inspects a ragged hole at the crown where Tommy’s bullet had struck it.

“Damn you, Miller!” he yells, his eyes blazing fury. “And damn the Carters!” His riders bristle behind him. All around me, the men’s shoulders shake with laughter, silent and not so silent.

Tommy smiles, cold and mirthless. “Now let’s set things straight between us, Caden,” he says. “I don’t care to waste no more time with you, first off. And second off, I don’t remember asking you to come over here and butt into my business. As for visiting again, don’t you come near me! I reckon we’re done here. You and your boys can go now.”

Tommy and Caden stare at each other across the river with grim sullen faces, neither man speaking nor moving.

After a moment, Tommy lifts his chin and looks scornfully at one of the other Cresskill riders, breaking the heavy silence. “Brett Speer?” he yells toward one of Caden’s men. “Ain’t it, boy?”

A young handsome rider looks askance and tips down his head to his chest. It’s clearly Brett Speer,
“Goddammit, boy!” Tommy yells, ruefully shaking his head, no. “And still sporting that God-awful mullet!”

The Deltas laugh, lightening the tense mood.

Tommy continues speaking to Speer, “Honest life wasn’t attractive to you no more?”

Speer doesn’t respond.

“Why are you running with the Cresskills?” Tommy asks. “You promised you’d fan it back to the Boise QZ!”

“I couldn’t make it, sir,” Speer says across the river to Tommy, his manner ashamed and sheepish.

“Too much moonshine!” Tommy laughs. “Someone oughta set you out in the sun and boil it outta you! Soak you in the creek overnight!”

The Deltas laugh freely.

“There were some things I had to do first,” Speer says.

“Well, you ain’t welcome back here!” Tommy yells before turning his attention back to Caden.

“And neither are the rest of you fellas. Y’all’ve got to the count of ten to get outta the range of our bullets and fan it back to Cresskill. After that, I won’t be responsible for what happens.”

The riders loosen in their saddles, swivel their heads toward the foothills, and refresh their reins in their hands, showing every intention of leaving.

“This thing ain’t over, Miller!” Caden yells. “There’ll be hell to pay. It might not be today but it’s coming sooner or later.”

“You’re messing with the wrong man, Caden,” Tommy says. “You can’t stop what’s bound to happen if you come visiting again.”

“And what’s that?” Caden asks.

“A fight to the finish,” Tommy says. “If you value your life, get going and don’t come back.”

Caden wheels his horse and yells at his riders. “Light out, boys!”

The riders follow his lead, galloping across the swale, heading toward the foothills.

Tommy lays his fingers between his lips and spirits a whistle. We’re Done Here, this whistle says. “Pile out, brothers!” he yells to the men. They sort through their jettisoned load-out and plate armor, gear-up solemnly, and idly drift away in knots.

I take a moment to think about what just happened. Caden mentioned Salt Lake City and a stolen pick-up truck. He said this. We arrived from Salt Lake City in a pick-up truck but there’s no way Joel stole it from the Fireflies. That’s impossible. I always figured they gave it to us as compensation for our troubles after drifting so far and so long, and arriving safely against the odds. A consolation prize. Caden said the wanted man left Salt Lake City a couple months ago but we haven’t been here that long. There’re others who arrived after us, like Link and Reed Blake, thickset brothers with broad-boned bronzed faces, wild black hair, and hard black eyes. They look like wanted men. Maybe one of them is the wanted man.
Fact is, drifters show up at the front gates every couple days begging to be allowed in, offering to trade provisions, tobacco, tools, furs, weapons, seeds, and sex. Some even try to sell us magic stones they say can be laid on bite wounds to absorb the cordyceps virus if you get bit. No one believes this. Cock and bull nonsense as Joel calls it.

Most drifters were turned loose from other settlements and frontier cities for insubordination, or they’re military defectors, or civilians who’ve escaped from oppressive QZs. Renegades—and everyone hates a renegade. There’s always the risk they could be moles for bands of rebels and outlaws so unless someone upstanding here can vouch for them, Tommy turns them away, telling them sternly from the fortified guardhouses atop the front gates they’re not wanted here. There’s a lot of distrust here. Move on. Get lost. Fan it. Sometimes they don’t listen and they’re chased-off with warning shots. If they don’t take the hint, we kill them. We have to do this. We figure some of them have a death wish but they don’t have the bullets or the fortitude to do it themselves.

Before I can think any more about this, a firm hand closes over my shoulder—Joel’s hand—as he passes me on his way back to the powerhouse. He pulls me close and speaks right into my ear as he passes, not even stopping to speak. “You keep outta this,” he says, his voice commanding. “Understand that right now.”
Chapter Twelve

Chillin’ & Grillin’

You’re invited to a chicken cookout at the home of Mrs. Maria Carter Miller & Mr. Tommy Miller, hosted by Ms. Eve Anderson

The Vale, Jackson

Sunday, Six o’clock in the evening

RSVP by Thursday to Eve

Six church bells peal across the Vale valley. Six o’clock. Joel and I stand in the living room of Tommy, Maria, and Eve’s double-volume open interior log cabin.

“Quit fussing,” Joel says. It’s his fault I’m fussing. Fussing with the frayed hem of my denim miniskirt. He insisted on a strict dress code after a large fancy slate written in Eve’s loopy cursive appeared on my bunk last week inviting me and him to the cookout. No jeans, no shorts. Cursing under my breath, I chose the first skirt I rummaged from the powerhouse cast-off bins.

Just get through dinner and you can change back into your jeans, I tell myself. I already know when I get out of this house, it’s going to feel like I’m being released from prison. The thing is, in Boston, we hid our bodies in our clothes. We were taught it was safer to stay dirty and low. To act dumb, simple, and small. Not to draw attention to ourselves. That’s all I know. You can’t run in a miniskirt. It’s impossible. You can’t bend over in one, either. I already tried.

Joel’s in a dark short-sleeved polo shirt, which is one of the first times I’ve seen him in a shirt that’s not either wet with fresh sweat or white with old sweat between his shoulder blades, or a collared shirt that’s not a work flannel. I didn’t even know he owned a shirt like this. I suppose he borrowed it from someone or found it in the cast-off bins. Over his polo, he wears his shoulder holster sheathing his .357 Magnum and .45 pistol. His short thick beard’s groomed into clean lines, and he smells too strongly of the tallow and wood-ash-hopper lye soap churned by the Taus, scented with lemon peels. Everyone at Jackson smells like this. Musky lemon. The leftover pieces are put into wardrobes and lockers to kill the moths and silverfish so everyone’s clothes smell like it, too. No one really dresses-up here, not even for weddings, so I know dinner must be important to him. I don’t know how I should feel about this. I don’t like it but I don’t understand why it should bother me.

In the open kitchen, Maria and Eve arrange ceramic platters over the granite counter tops, the air thick with the smell of baked food. A spiral staircase leads to a large overhanging loft with a slatted banister hung with coarse wool blankets. Fluffy sheepskin drape the overhead beams and mounted game hangs the walls. Long-faced moose and Rocky Mountain bighorn cut down by Tommy’s disciplined marksmanship.

Eve approaches in a tight low-cut wrap-dress. She’s all curves and flesh. I’ve never seen such a soft body on a woman. Soft and fleshy. Maybe at one time she had a thin waist and a dainty figure
but you can’t say she’s not plump. She has a clear complexion, thick dirty blond hair, and vibrant blue eyes. I’ll give her that. The pounds rest well on her frame. They make her abrasiveness seem less severe. Cuddly. She dresses too young for her age. I suppose she's around forty. I suppose she’s terrified of getting old. Everyone is.

“Lemonade?” she asks Joel and offers him a glass.

“Much obliged,” he says and takes it.

She lets him sip momentarily in peace before opening her mouth. “See them flowers?” She gestures at a marigold bouquet on a wrought-iron coffee table. “Ain’t they pretty?”

“Them’s a beauty,” Joel says.

“The Shaws sent them for Tommy and Maria.” She rolls her eyes over him. “I wouldn’t mind someone sending me flowers.” She paws at her hair and fondles a large turquoise pendant nestling her tanned cleavage. “How are y’all liking it here?”

“It suits us just fine,” he says.

“It must be nice coming back west after drifting. I reckon you got mighty lonesome for fresh mountain air.”

“We always land somewhere.”

“It can’t be easy starting over at fifty.”

He swirls the lemonade around his tumbler. “Seems like you’ve been investigating me.”

“What do you mean?” she asks.

“I haven’t been advertising my age but somehow you know it.”

“Tommy mentioned it.”

“I reckon Tommy was feeling talkative?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“No harm done. You wanted to know my age and you found it out. Now it’s only fair to tell me yours.” He smiles faintly at her.

She smiles into her lemonade. “I’m just the right age.” She takes a long sip. “Y’all reckon on staying long?”

“That’s what we came back for. We wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

“What are y’all fixing on doing here?”

“Nothing much.”

“No ambitions?”

“Is there something you’d like to recommend?” he asks.

“Well,” she says. “I’d try to make something of myself. Be important around here.”
He looks into his glass with a bland smile. “Well, I reckon I’ve got some mighty strange notions, ‘cause I always figured a man’s value’s in his dealings with himself and others. His word, his principles, and his integrity.” He looks at her directly. “Seems like I’ve had it wrong this whole time.”

“It’s given a man should be principled,” she says. “But that hardly makes him important. He should have a position—authority—like your brother.”

“My brotherly affections run deep but I reckon that’s the difference between me and Tommy. I can’t say those things ever interested me none.” A quiet derision alights his eyes. “Doesn’t look like my future’ll amount to much value now, does it?”

She laughs liltingly. “As long as you’re happy with that.”

“I reckon it doesn’t take much. I don’t seek what I don’t want.”

She smiles like she just won a big prize. I don’t like this smile. She’s got him all wrong. Joel’s a good man with a good heart. He’s not lazy but he’s not ambitious like other men. He likes a simple life and simple things. He wants the kind of simple things other men don’t want at all. He doesn’t envy what other men have. If they have to have meat on their plate six days-a-week, he’s happy to have it once. He doesn’t care about changing the world like other men. He doesn’t want to change the hearts and minds of anyone because he knows it’s not worth his time. He doesn’t lay awake at night worrying about the problems of the world. He’s fine with letting things go the way they are. He’s never envious or jealous. Tommy’s the opposite. He’s got big ambitions. He wants power and influence. Joel would be perfectly happy to live in exile like a lone wolf while Tommy would rather live like a king with a court.

“You’re a fascinating man, Joel Miller,” she says. “It’s gonna take some time getting used to having you around here.”

She excuses herself and struts to the foyer to greet the gathering guests. The genial Shaws arrive with their teenage daughter, followed by the boisterous Warburtons and their teenage son. Both families are Taus. I’ve seen them around the powerhouse but I don’t know them. The men wear mossy-oak camouflage pants and fighting load carrier vests. They leave their load-out at a maple gun cabinet aside the door and hang their baseball caps on a deer-antler horn rack, the imprints fresh in their thick greasy hair.

I’ll bet Eve bores the hell out of Joel. He’s not a ladies’ man like she thinks he is. People bore him, especially women like her. She’s flighty. Always searching for something elusive, always on the prowl, and always ready to tell you how amazing she is. He gets along best with people who are down-to-earth and honest. There’s nothing down-to-earth or honest about her. I glance at Joel, trying to catch his eye. He catches it. “She’s sure got ideas about you,” I tease.

“I ain’t worried none,” he says. “My ideas run in other directions.” He walks over to the long oak dining table rung in side chairs where the families start to gather. Wives marvel at the stainless-steel flatware, glazed dinner plates, and a large blue enamel vase of bright field flowers in the center of the table.

Tommy sits at the table head, the seat farthest from the kitchen. Joel sits to his left and Maria sits to his right. I pull-out the empty chair at Joel’s free side but before I can sit, Eve calls my name from the opposite end of the table where she’s directing families into their seats. “That’s my chair,” she says to me. “Your setting’s over here.” She pats the empty place setting in front of her. “With the Shaws ‘n’ ‘em.”
“But I wanna sit here,” I say and glance at Joel. I never get to sit with him at meals. The mess is segregated by dorms and we’re not allowed to mix at meals. He’s in D Club and I’m in Z Club.

“It’s better over there,” Maria says to me with a wink. “Y’all’ll get served first.”

I open my mouth to protest but before I can, Joel addresses me. “Listen to Maria.”

Now don’t get angry, I tell myself. Don’t lose your temper. I have this trick when I start to get angry. I take a deep breath and count to ten. I tell myself to leave all the fighting to the idiots and the agitators. Not me. I’m better than that. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. Good. See? You’re better than that, I tell myself. Just get through dinner, okay?

I walk over to the Shaws and sit next to Bailey, the family’s matriarch. She fills my tumbler from a glass pitcher of lemonade and trickles apple-honeysuckle wine into my goblet. Corbin sits on her other side. He’s my age. He’s goodnatured, good looking, and clean-cut with high and tight brown hair but he’s dating one of the Zetas who cliques-up with Ashley and Burke, so I pretend he doesn’t exist. So there.

Hair raked into a baggy knot, Tommy taps his tumbler with a soup spoon and waits for the chatter to die down. When it does, he speaks with a genial smile. “I’mma keep this mighty short ‘cause I reckon I could do some serious grubbing myself. As far as table etiquette goes, don’t get fussed-up with niceties. It’d spoil the whole point of eating. When a man’s hungry and he’s mighty close to where he’s gonna eat, he oughtn’t to bother his head with such foolishness—so let’s get to grubbing!” He sits and reaches his hands to Joel and Maria for grace. Everyone lids-down and joins hands. Maria says a little prayer and at the prayer’s conclusion, eyes blink sheepishly to a chorus of Amens.

Tommy retrieves the roasted chicken platter from the kitchen counter and sets it down at his place setting. Eve brings him a steel carving knife and a fork, a honing steel, and a tall cachepot of steaming water. As he carves the chicken, she and Maria come to my end of the table, and ask everyone to pass-down their dinner plates.

Maria speaks to the room and stacks the incoming plates. “This here’s been a Carter Sunday ritual since I was a little girl.” She and Eve load the plates with chopped salads and roasted vegetables from stoneware platters and glass serving bowls. “My daddy would stand at the head of the table and my mom at the other end. Everything would be ready in front of him: the horn-and-silver-handled carving knife and fork, and the steel. Dinner couldn’t start without it. It didn’t matter how sharp the knife was—he sharpened it to his liking. Once he started carving, we’d pass our plates and our mom would serve the sides. He’d always put the perfect cut on everyone’s plates. When we had beef, he’d auction-off the marrow. I never got a taste for it but I still begged him for it! He always saved me the wishbone when we had chicken.”

Tommy carves the chicken and Warburton strikes-up conversation with him. “That was Caden and his Cresskill boys who rode in here Friday afternoon, was it?”

“Quite,” Tommy says.

“What the hell were they doing here?” Warburton asks.

“I reckon we’ll find out sooner or later,” Tommy says.

“Well, what’d he say?”

“It wasn’t a social call. Seems he’s got notions.”
“The fugitive?”

“You believe that cock and bull story?” Tommy scoffs. “Tales of outlaws and wanted folks are always getting play around here—folks are always hungry for diversion. I’m not taking his end of it and neither should you. The Cresskills are notorious hypocrites and liars—and goddamn idiots. When a man’s minding his own business, he ain’t running any risks to speak of.”

“Reckon he was talking about Chamberlain and Tug?” Warburton asks, referring to a father and son who arrived one week after Link and Reed Blake.

“Chamberlain ain’t looking for trouble,” Tommy says. “They ain’t fighters. Just honest folks wanting a chance to work and earn a living. They’ve been mighty proud to throw-in with us.”

Warburton backpedals with a bland smile. “I like the fella. I wouldn’t pick his son out as a troublemaker, either.”

“Caden’s the type who likes folks to be mad at him,” Tommy says. “It makes him feel important to be hated. He’s big enough that nobody wants to start a ruckus to see how tough he really is.”

“It’s the same old game,” Maria says to the table. “The same one they’ve played with everyone who’s tried to settle in this territory. Sometimes it works ‘cause folks get scared-out quick but the Carters don’t scare none. We ain’t the type to let anyone get the best of us. We ain’t a bit scared.”

“Those Cresskill boys are always butting into something.” Eve says. “They want the whole country to themselves, which means wiping us out. A war to the last man. Riding into these hills, plundering, and rustling anything they could get their hands on.”

Warburton’s tall blond wife, Kassidy, says, “They can’t wipe us out. Not with the Deltas.”

“Brothers don’t wanna interfere,” Tommy says. “And we ain’t taking the chance. I reckon them Cresskill boys are hell on wheels once they get started. If they start something, they’re gonna finish it.”

“If we stand for it,” Warburton yells, “we’re a bunch of cowards who ain’t fit to look Caden in the eye!”

“We’ll wait for them to play their hand,” Tommy says.

Warburton agitates. “But if they start anything, we’ve gotta wipe them out!”

“We can’t fight the whole bunch,” Maria says. “Not singly. Not if they burned us out.”

“We’d see them coming miles away,” Kassidy says.

“They’d come at night,” Maria says. “Or at dusk, when the light’s bad and the shooting’s tough.”

“How ‘bout sneaking down to Cresskill and running them out ourselves?” Kassidy asks.

Warburton hollers an exuberant war cry. “Let’s go after them! We’ll clean them clear outta the country. Smoke ‘em out and run ‘em out to the Pacific!”

“That wouldn’t settle anything,” Maria says, “only postpone what’s inevitable. A thing like this ain’t settled till it’s done right.”

“I’m all for cleaning them out,” Tommy says. “But I’mma let this one work itself out. I’m not looking to force a showdown. If they come crowding us with riders, we’ll bust them up some.
Make things mighty interesting for them.”

“Is there someone who can help?” Kassidy asks.

“Meaning?” Maria asks.

“Friendly settlements in these parts?” Kassidy asks.

Maria shakes her head, no. “This is business between the Carters and the Cresskills. There’ve been Carters and Cresskills in this territory for over 100 years, and there’s never been a friendly word between us. The feud’s so old, I don’t even remember how it started. We’ve been at it too long to stop now. Our great great great great grandpa wanted trees, so he left Arkwright and we’ve been up here ever since.”

“Looks like we’ve got ourselves a range war!” Warburton yells.

“What’s this?” Kassidy asks.

“Cattlemen down in the valleys and sheep men up on the rims,” Warburton says. “When the droughts hit, they threw down over ranges. Cattlemen could stand a bit of rustling but not the sheep men. They’d drive the cowboys offa their range, leave nothing but a bare path in their wake. Not even weeds. Sheep hooves cut-up the bottoms of the watering holes and horses won’t drink dirty water. It was enough to ignite a range war. I heard all about them growing-up. Six generations of Warburtons in the southeast corner of Montana Territory. Border family. You could spit on South Dakota Territory from the front porch. The only time we got together aside from funerals and weddings was Christmas and branding day. Everyone was either a cowboy or a miner, nothing else.”

“What was the town called?” Eve asks.

“Reckon it don’t need to be named,” Warburton says.

“How’s that?” Eve asks.

“All those towns are dead and gone,” Warburton says.

“They’ll rise again,” Eve says. “With new folks.”
“He was a bronco-buster,” Kassidy says to the table with a big smile, meaning her husband, Warburton. “The slickest buster that ever busted.”

“Saddle bronc riding and bare bronc riding,” Warburton says.

“My cowpuncher,” Kassidy says. She winds an arm around his back and addresses the table. “I resisted him for a long time. I had a mess of other suitors but I couldn’t make up my mind.”

“I knew she’d be mine,” Warburton says to the table. “I fought for her—big guys, big as me. A little push here and there, always about something else, but it was always about her. I won. I took her to senior prom on my tractor.”

“He wore his cowboy boots on our wedding day,” she laughs. “With his tuxedo!”

“That’s how we get ‘er done,” he says with a wink. “We owned 500 heads of cattle and wrangled livestock. I broke and trained horses the Devil himself wouldn’t ride. In all them years, I broke every bone in my body—twice—but I only got tossed once.” He shoves his bangs from his forehead, revealing a deep scar. “Unlucky Strike—an Arabian stallion. Nervous and bad tempered. We got him for free. He killed two men, thrown off his back. They said he couldn’t be ridden but I rode him hard. Nothing on two, three, or four legs I can’t ride or break. When I was three, my papa threw me on a Thoroughbred and told me to hang on by the mane or else fall off and get left behind.”

“A fistful of mane,” Shaw says. “Before I met Bailey, I worked on a ranch for room and board, and a pack of cigarettes a day. Had to get my head straight from two tours. From dawn till dusk, I strung fences, fixed sheds, and set-up posts till my hands were rope-burnt into one big ugly mean callus. My boss gave me a rifle and a black Morgan with a stripe down his head for a Christmas bonus. Most days I went dawn till dusk without talking to no one but him. And lemme tell y’all—there’s nothing like chasing down the sunset from the saddle with the wind in your face, the smell of a sweaty horse, the sound of his lungs, and the feel of his muscles galloping down a dusty trail.”

“Nebraska Territory?” Eve asks him.

“That’s right,” Bailey says. “We’re from a place nobody’s ever heard of, one of those towns that pops-up and nobody really knows what it’s been put there for. Flat, dusty, and pretty near dead. Everyone was related in one way or another, all with the same eyes and jaws. Even before I could talk, I learned from my momma how to silk corn, break beans, shell peas, and throw hay. She insisted on teaching me everything early, said once I got married, I couldn’t ask her for help. Poppa had no education, knew nothing but drinking, brawling, cussing, and hunting. My brothers taught me how to bait a hook, cast a line, land a fish, and they took me mudding.”

“Mudding?” I ask no one in particular.

“Mud bogging,” she says in a tone of voice like it explains everything.

I picture a big mud pit where you go for some sort of beauty treatment but Bailey’s not the type who’d do much of anything for the sake of beauty benefits, if you know what I mean.
“You wait for a good rain,” Bailey says, “or in the spring when the snow starts to melt. You mud-up your 4x4s in a jacked-up truck in a big old mud hole out in the middle of nowhere. The muddier, the better.”

I stifle a laugh. “That’s what you did for fun?”

“We didn’t have fancy shopping malls like y’all QZ kids,” she smirks.

Everyone laughs.

I don’t care that they laugh at my expense—but Joel does. He speaks to the room. “Ellie might look like a Yankee and talk like a Yankee but she’s mighty clever at handing it to the rest of y’all rough rednecks!”

I smile shyly at my plate. I won’t forget he said this for a long time.

“Do what now?” Warburton asks him. “Kassidy’s folks crossed the Great Plains in a covered wagon, got attacked by Indians half-a-dozen times. Her great great great great granddaddy ran a miners’ saloon out in an Arizona Territory mining camp, the kinda place where you couldn’t walk down the street without getting shot by tinhorns, raiders, and whores. She can out-cuss, out-ride, out-drive, out-chug, out-bog, out-fish, out-score, and out-shoot any man willing to lose to a lady.”

He levels his knife at Joel. “You wanna bet on that, Texas?”

“Ain’t much of a betting man,” Joel says.

“Too much QZ living—made you soft. Can’t say I admire that infernal low country.” He gestures his knife at Joel’s watch. “I suppose that’s where you picked-up that fancy ticker.”

“I beg your pardon?” Joel asks, his eyes flashing a hard bright glint. I know that look in his eyes. Joel doesn’t mix with men like Warburton. The simple fact is, Joel makes people uneasy. He knows this acutely and it’s what he wants. He enjoys making people uncomfortable because he knows he can.

“Reckon a man don’t need a watch out here to know night from day,” Warburton laughs.

A muscle twitches at the base of Joel’s jaw. This is one of the signs of his anger when it gets inflamed. First that muscle twitches, then he goes pale, then the back of his neck goes red, and then his muscles gather themselves up for a fight.

“Y’all really came out yonder from Boston?” Warburton asks Joel.

Joel draws up his tumbler in his hand and rolls it around his fingers. “That’s right.”

“Y’all kin?” he asks, meaning me.

“Not by blood or by breed.”

“No place for a girl out there,” Warburton says, meaning me.

I don’t respond. I’m keeping my mouth shut. Firmly shut.

“I’ll have to take issue with you on that,” Joel says.

“I suppose y’all had luck on your side.”

“Luck, and a whole lotta plain common sense.”
“No better time for a long story than over a good table.” Warburton playfully smacks the table with the flat of his hand. “Fire away!”

Joel straightens in his chair and draws-up his shoulders. “I reckon you’re meaning to know how we got here?”

“That’s my intention. Boston wasn’t attractive to y’all no more?”

“How and why we got here’s nobody’s business but our own,” he says, his voice beyond argument. “And what we’re doing here’s nobody’s business, either.”

A palpable tension settles over the table. Tommy addresses Joel. “I reckon some folks can’t help asking questions—”

“About things that don’t concern them,” Joel says, interrupting him.

“Some folks seem to attract it more than others,” Joel says.

Warburton addresses Tommy. “Miller, tell your damn brother ain’t nobody interfering with him!”

“Easy, Warburton,” Tommy says and smiles amusedly. “Joel’s just playing around. He’s always pulling-off stunts like that—”

Crack! The sound of breaking glass comes from Joel’s direction. All heads swivel toward him. His tumbler’s broken. He must’ve squeezed it in his hand till it broke. The heavy shattered base lays on his plate, covered in shards. Eyes blazed, he rises and strides into the kitchen cradling his bloody hand with the other. If it were anyone but Joel, we’d all be thinking, what a fucking lunatic. But Joel’s not violent. He’s dramatic and passionate, kind of like those swaggering cowboys from the Old West. He’s a gentleman. He plays by a firm code of good sportsmanship. He’d never go around shooting men in the back. Sometimes he just gets carried away, is all.

“It’s alright, folks,” Tommy says to the table with a twitching smile. “Reckon they got carried away. Trouble’s over.”

“I ain’t the one seeing red,” Warburton says.

“I ain’t saying he was wrong,” Tommy says. “I wouldn’t be crowding him none if I were you. Joel ain’t in the habit of making explanations to no one. It’s just his way.”

“Well, I wasn’t raised that-a-way,” Warburton says.

“If he was really aiming to stir-up trouble,” Tommy says with a bland smile, “he would’ve already dragged you outside. He knows I’d burst into tears if anything got broken up in here.” He glances toward the kitchen where Joel stands at the counter and rinses his bloody hand over an enamelware bowl. He calls-out to him. “Ain’t that right, Joel?”

“Looks like y’all need freshening-up,” Eve says to the table. She picks-up Joel’s dirty plate and an empty lemonade pitcher. She heads to the open kitchen and starts refilling it from a tall glass urn at
Joel’s side. “Wish y’all could’ve tasted my ice-cold sweet tea,” she says to the room. “Y’all would’ve loved it, made with real Montana Territory mint.”

“Late August you could smell that sweet peppermint for miles,” Kassidy says.

“What I wouldn’t give for a drop of real Kentucky bourbon and fresh mint,” Shaw says. “Scarcer than ice in Hell!”

As the conversation picks-up, I clandestinely watch Joel in the kitchen. He examines his injured hand, palm side-up. Eve takes his wrist and pulls his hand toward her. “Gimme your hand,” she says. “You’ve cut yourself.”

Go away, I yell at her silently. Leave him alone! Joel hates to be fussed over, hates people touching him. The back of my neck flares hot in anger. Take your filthy hands off him. There are plenty of men here who’d have you and you pick the one who’s not interested! Can’t you see he’s not into you? You’re not his type. Go away and find someone else to bother. I swear to God—leave him alone!

His muscles draw-up and his body stiffens at her touch. This pleases me. This pleases me greatly. I told you, I say to her silently. Don’t touch him. I’m the only one allowed to touch him.

“Lemme take care of it,” she says. She grabs a dish towel from the counter and cradles his hand with it. “Does it hurt?”

“Don’t make a fuss,” he mutters. He pulls his hand away and returns to the table. He sits and stares at his injured hand cradled in his lap.

Eve sashays to the table and arranges fresh tableware over his place setting. “My daddy drank sweet tea by the gallon,” she says. She fills Joel’s glass with lemonade and slips into her seat at his side. “He was raised up in these here mountains. That’s how I met Maria ‘n’ ‘em. Our moms had the same hospital room when they gave birth, born on the same day. The Carters were like second family.” She smiles warmly at Maria. “Maria’s daddy was a true gentleman by the grace of God. Maria’s his spitting image—a real gunslinger.”

Maria lowers her fork, mid-bite, and speaks to the table. “My daddy always wanted a son but after I was born, he didn’t wanna try for another.” She waits till the polite laughter dies down. “He gave me my first rifle, taught me how to shoot, track, bait, and hunt blinds. I shot pretty near anything—bucks, turkey, coyote, elk. We’d drive out to a right far piece in the middle of nowhere and unload boxes of ammo.”

“She shoots like a man,” Eve says to the table. “And that’s a supreme compliment. I raised hell in my own way. Looking for fun and asking for trouble. Feeding the Devil and starving God. I wasn’t afraid to get dirty, went from mud to makeup in five-seconds flat. Friday night football, Saturday night bonfires, Sunday morning church. Whisky drinking, cowboy chasing, and mudding with cute country boys. I love the dirt and dust of a good rodeo. Grip and ride! I rode horses before I could walk. My daddy sat me in front of him when I was two and turned me out on my own at four. I ran barrels and roped, junior rodeoing and college rodeoing, but I gave it all up when I met Graham.” Her concentration drifts, paralyzed in memories.

Tommy clears his throat and speaks to the table. “I wasn’t born with good horse sense like all y’all,” he says. “Motorcycles. Learned from our pappaw on his old Sportster, out on his farm in Texas Territory. We lived there with Mama ‘n’ ‘em till he couldn’t run it no more. We didn’t have much but what we had, we cherished. Mama taught us how to cook. Dad taught us how to fight, how to bait our own hooks, hunt our own blinds, and field dress our own kill.” He glances at Joel.
and smiles. “Me and Joel figured-out the birds and the bees all by ourselves.” He laughs unguardedly, his eyes twinkling good humor. My heart skips a beat at this laugh. I’m overwhelmed by a feeling of great warmth and affection for him.

Joel laughs dryly and massages his nape. “What more could you want?”

“How about Mama’s Saturday apple pie?” Tommy asks with a warm smile. “Tart Gravensteins straight from the orchard out back in big windfalls. No lemon, no syrup, baked deep in double pastry with no bottom crust, eaten with fresh whipped cream.”

“Served cold on Sunday mornings with coffee,” Joel says.

“Hot as Hell, strong as a bad habit, darker than a step-daddy’s wrath, bitter as heartbreak—”

“And black as the mark of Cain,” Joel says with a faint smile.

Eve rises, frames her generous hips, and speaks to the room. “Only a fool would promise pie as good as your mama’s,” she says, “but I gave it a whirl. I hope y’all saved room for dessert!”

Families murmur affirmatively. Husbands rise and wrestle waistbands from their bulged bellies. Wives stack dirty dinnerware to their chests and congregate in the kitchen.
I exit the cabin onto the long wide porch bathed in settling dusk. I walk through the beaten-down grass toward the river. Halfway there, I lay back on the ground and stretch-out. The dewy grass tickles the backs of my hands and arms. There was no grass in Boston. It was all eaten before I was born by the military horses. Dug-up for brew-ups and boiled with blood nicked from the military’s livestock. The only grass I ever saw was coarse marsh grass down by the sea. I’m sure people ate that, too.

Squealing kids streak past me holding mason jars with trapped fireflies. The low voices of big men carry from the cabin porch where they sit and smoke corn-husk cigarettes and hand-carved pipes. I smell their mixings from here. At my back, I hear footsteps approaching, swishing the long grass. The feet of a big man. My gut tells me it’s Joel. They grow louder and closer until his large familiar form lowers to my side. He stretches-out on his back and folds his arms beneath his head. I feel the heat coming-off his body.

We lay in silence, looking-up at the infinite stars beyond the thin gauzy clouds. A fox barks across the distance. Trilling crickets and frogs fill the air. Light breezes stir the pines, mingled with sweet clover perfume. I’ve been learning all the names of the things out here. I’m not doing it because I love nature. I just can’t imagine living in a place and not knowing the names of everything around me. Everything needs to be named and experienced.

Joel sighs deep. The breath catches in his chest. This is a heavy melancholy sigh. I can’t ignore this sigh nor what it’s dug-up from deep inside him. “What is it?” I ask.

“What’s what?” he asks.

“That sigh. You let out that sigh.”

“I reckon,” he says. “Thinking about Texas Territory. Warm summer nights. Sweet country air, bonfires out in the middle of nowhere, laying back on my tailgate, listening to the crickets and the wind through the pines, and gazing up at the stars.”

“Did you have the same stars in Texas Territory?” I ask.

“Reckon so.”

“Where’d they come from?”

“Stars?”

“Stars.”

“Our mama said it was God lighting his candles, said God lit a candle in our hearts that could never be blown out. Tommy and I always figured it was dragons.”

“Dragons?”

“The fire they breathed turned into stars and their tails stirred them into constellations.” He points
to a twinkling swirling northeastern wreath of stars. “See that one over there? Angels pulled him from the sea and hung him across the heavens."

“How’d he die?” I ask.

“How all dragons die. Slain—by a knight. Archangels’ swords.”

“Are they up there, too?”

“Sure enough.”

“Will we turn into stars when we die?”

He doesn’t respond. I don’t blame him. It was a dumb question.

“Were your parents religious?” I ask.

“With names like Thomas and Joel?” he asks.

“Thomas!” I laugh. Thomas is the name of a jovial old man with a round face, kind eyes, and plump jowly cheeks. It’s not a name for someone who looks or acts like Tommy. “What’s Joel short for?”

“Joel’s short for Joel,” he says.

“What was it like?” I ask.

“What was what like?”

“Texas Territory at Critical Mass.”

“That shouldn’t interest you.”

“How’d you get through it?”

“Meddling’s a terrible habit of yours.”

“There’s a lot worse.”

“It sure ain’t polite.”

“Neither’s stonewalling.”

“You never tire yourself out, do you?” he asks and exhales one long breath through his nose. I know he’s going to answer me. He’s feeling talkative tonight. Maybe he drank some wine. Maybe he’s a little drunk. Maybe that’s why he smashed his glass. He’s probably drunk. I feel his thoughts gathering-up. Here it comes.

“It wasn’t like anything you’d ever seen. Everyone was lost. Husbands looking for wives, military for divisions, parents for kids. Nobody asked nothing. Weren’t no answers no how. Where do we go? Where do we sleep? Where do we get food, water, gas, and medicine? Everyone was in motion without purpose or destination. Moving without seeing nothing, saying nothing, or doing nothing. Just moving. Rivers of folks fleeing destruction. Day after day, the stories of dead folks grew. The stench got mighty bad. Folks full of infection, houses full of dead, streets full of blood, and the air full of smoke.
“At first there was a mess of firemen, EMTs, and cops. Open cities full of ‘em, faces grim and sullen—till they vanished overnight. Military transports took over the roads covered in white dust and black ash. They sealed-off the cities and seized cars, trucks, motorcycles, boats, bikes, and horses.

“Fires burned for weeks. A giant pillar of flame lit-up the whole skyline, burned green and red for miles. Blotted-out the sun, heated-up the earth, and roared in your ears day and night. By and by came an oil-soaked drizzle. Everything was smeared in greasy little spots. Utilities blinked—gas, water, electricity, phones, radio, television, internet. We ate half-cooked dinners and drank rusty water till the taps went dry. What little provisions could still be found were more expensive than gold.

“We stopped winding watches. There weren’t newspapers, only rumors. We had radios and statements from the President—not a single fact. We didn’t believe a goddamn word no how. We knew what was happening without having to be told. Quarantine, cordyceps, spores. A whole mess of words that meant nothing, still mean nothing. Ain’t worth a good goddamn.

“It was tough for kids your age. They grew up with big dreams—fortunes to be sought, successes to be found. Going off to college, travelling the world, falling in love, and having kids of their own. They hadn’t seen or done nothing and they never would.

“In the beginning, there were big acts of courage and kindness. Hearts were open and hands gave freely. Heroism occurred so often it almost became commonplace, folks from all walks of life bound by a common fate. Old grievances were forgotten. Only helpfulness and goodwill remained. Mankind banded together but it was short-lived. Once freedom and shelter got threatened, folks got selfish. Windows were for looking out. Now we feared ‘em, boarded ‘em up, and kept our distance. Knocks on the door meant terror. Everyone was suspicious of who was standing at his side. We waited in horrible expectation. Everyone found God, and cried and prayed to Him. No one cared if God was a spirit in the sky or a mouse in the garage. Everyone prayed to stay alive. To save the world.”

He’s told me more about the Critical in a couple minutes than I’ve heard in a couple years. I wish I could respond but I’d be of no use to him. I have nothing useful to say. I wasn’t around so it sounds like a fable. It’s about as believable as Gold’s stories of Beverly Hills. I can’t process the world Joel came from. I don’t even try.

We lay in silence until he digs into his hip pocket and pulls something out. He holds it against the sky and swings it toward me. A wishbone. Tommy must’ve saved it for him while he was carving-up the chicken. “Well, I can’t do it myself,” he says. “A little help?”

I grab the opposite end of it and the backs of our hands touch.

“Ready?” he asks. “Go!”

We strain against each other until he twists his wrist and the wishbone snaps.

“Make a wish,” he says and points to my larger fragment.

I toss it across the grass. “I don’t believe in them.” Wishes! Ha! What would I do with a wish? I don’t believe in them. So what. Why would I believe in something that’ll never come true? I stopped believing in wishes when I was ten. Who wouldn’t? Until I was ten, I went to bed every night and made the same wish. I wished for my parents to come find me and take me home. Not, God, please make me pretty, please send me my true love, please let me never grow old or sick, and please bring peace to the world. Please no more bombs, wars, or famine. I didn’t wish for any
of that. Every night, I prayed to God and said, ‘God, please send me my mom and dad. Wherever they are, please tell them to come find me and take me home. Please tell them I’m sick of being lonely and unloved and abandoned.’ Every night without fail I made that wish. Either God was listening and He was mocking me or He wasn’t listening at all. So there. I won’t fall for making wishes ever again.

Eve’s voice carries from the front porch. She speaks in a lordly tone because nothing she does comes natural, not even calling people inside for coffee and dessert, which I suppose is what she’s doing.

Joel pulls to his feet and straightens his shirt beneath his crisscrossed shoulder holster. “Time for pie, it appears like.”

“I hate pie,” I say.

“We ain’t arguing that.”

“I’ve gotta stomachache.”

“You don’t have to eat it, you just gotta take a slice.”

“Meaning you want me to waste food?”

“Meaning you can’t stay out here. Juvenile curfew laws.”

I groan disgust. Damn this place and its goddamn rules. “Stay with me.”

“It won’t do. It ain’t the way. And you know it doesn’t work like that.” He offers me his hand.

“Saddle up.”

“I wanna use my wish,” I say.

He shifts his feet impatiently. “I know what you’re gonna say, Ellie, and I ain’t taking no for an answer.”

“My wish is to stay out here.”

“You can’t always have things your way. Let’s go.” He beckons his hand toward me. “That’s an order, not a request.”

“That’s my wish. You have to respect it.” I gesture at his shoulder holster. “Just leave me one of your guns before you leave. I’ll be fine.”

He bridges his hands to his hips and looks at me directly with a playful glint twinkling his eyes. “If you don’t get up of your own free will, Ellie Williams, I’mma drag you across this lawn into that house.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” I laugh, playing along. I love when he’s like this. Playful. It happens maybe once-a-year. He must be drunk, is what I’m thinking.

“You can believe it or not,” he laughs. “It’s a fact. Whichever way you want it and however it’s gonna get done, you’re coming inside with me.”

I sigh petulantly, take his hand, and let him pull me to my feet. I shake my ass to straighten my ridden-up miniskirt and tug at my bunched-up panties nestled between my ass cheeks, damp and cold from the dewy grass. I can already feel Joel clamping-down on his playfulness. He’s probably
telling himself right now, No, Joel, you get away from that. Keep away from that. No good comes from that. No good comes from fooling around with folks. You’ll wake up tomorrow, and your heart will be heavy and full of sorrow and pain. You’ll think of that laughter from yesterday with Ellie and it’ll mock you. Clamp it down. Cut it off. Bury it deep. It never existed. Forget all about it.

“Can I still make my wish?” I ask.

“Not if you don’t believe in them,” he says.

“When we get inside, I wanna sit next to you.”

“I wouldn’t advise that but I won’t stop you from trying. You sure got her fussed-up some.”

“She should carve her name into her chair if it’s so important to her.”

“Looks like we’re of the same mind about one thing.”

“What’s that?” I ask, hoping he’s about to call her a bitch.

“She sure seems mighty particular about them things.”

Eve’s taken with him. Anyone could see it. I don’t know why I should care about any of this or have any opinion at all. I’d be happy for Joel to meet someone and fall in love. I’d be happy for a woman to make him fall in love with her, and I’d be happy to see him happy and loved. I guess I just don’t want it to be her. The last woman he loved was Tess and I wish it could be someone more like her. I know I don’t have the right to say who he should choose to be with or not but I guess I’m worried it’ll make less room for me in his life, so it feels very threatening. Loud and clear, an alarm’s been raised. I don’t want to believe it. I don’t want to listen.

When I think of Eve, she makes me feel like doing bad things. I want to fuck with her and I don’t know why. I’m flooded in anger, which sweeps over me and fills me with an irrational rage over dumb simple things that shouldn’t even really matter. I mean, it’s just a stupid chair. I know my thoughts are unjust, irrational, and obsessive. I know better. I can’t help it. I’m afraid Joel will fall for her games. She’s possessive and he’s passive. I don’t like feeling this way. I hate hating people. It makes me feel bitter and vindictive. All I really want is to not think about her at all.
Chapter Fifteen
Toasted barley coffee perfumes the air. A warm fire crackles the large iron wood stove. Tommy and Maria have a very pleasant home. One could imagine curling-up on the couch in front of a roaring fire on a rainy day in this home and feeling very happy you’re here with the rest of the world shut-out. I suppose if I were to live in Jackson for the rest of my life, living in a home like this wouldn’t be all that bad. It’s not that I don’t like the powerhouse dorms. I like the building with its clean lines, high ceilings, and Old World stateliness. I just value my privacy. There’s no privacy there.

Eve and Maria stand at the end of the table where I’d sat for dinner. They offer pie to the Shaws and the Warburtons, and pour steaming ersatz coffee into their mugs. I follow Joel to his seat and I settle into Eve’s empty chair at his side. I feel her eyes burning into me as I do this. Good. Watch me, Eve, I tell her silently. Watch me disrespect you in front of everyone.

“Ellie, honey,” she says from the far end of the table. She holds the backrest of the empty chair where I’d sat for dinner. “Come set yourself down for pie. You want cherry or peach?”

God, this is so dumb. A table’s just a place where you put down your food to eat and a chair’s what you sit in to eat it. It’s all the same. I look at Joel for direction, my lips parting to speak.

“Hold up,” Tommy says to me. “Go fetch your chair—bring it on down.” He pats the table at his side. “There’s plenty of room right here.”

I choke back a triumphant smile. See, Eve, I say to her silently. I won. I won your stupid game. I go get my chair and set it next to Tommy’s at the head of the table. The air around him’s belted in his scent. My breath alters and my whole body breaks-out in a flushed sweat at this smell. I feel myself moving closer to him, like I’m being magnetically drawn to him. I can’t help it. My muscles tremble at the memory of his warm firm body beneath me. The way I opened-up against his finger as he pushed it inside me.

I become super-conscious of my breathing, my posture, the way my hair falls, the smells coming off my body, and where I place my limbs. I try to imagine myself through his eyes. I want him to notice me but I don’t dare look at him to see if he does. I worry he’ll see in my eyes how much I’m thinking about him. I find myself blushing even at the thought of him. I suppose he’d find it odd a sixteen-year-old girl is thinking about him like this. He’d find it odd my heart races when I think about him. I don’t care. I want him fiercely.

Eve and Maria work their way toward us with pie and ersatz. Joel and Tommy each take a slice of peach. I take cherry. Eve and Maria sit, and urge everyone to eat. Sterling flatware chimes plates, mouths talked down to silence.

I startle as I feel something brush-up against my thigh—Tommy’s knee. How’d his knee find its way against mine? I pull mine away and glance at him. He pushes a piece of pie around his plate with his fork. If he senses me looking at him, he gives no intention of showing it. His face is closed. He gives nothing away. It must’ve been a mistake, I tell myself. We’re sitting so close to each other, it was bound to happen. A little bump here and there. These things happen.
He raises his coffee cup to his mouth and sips. Beneath the table, I feel him touch my knee. My heart races. I realize this wasn’t a mistake. He put his big warm hand over my knee and he’s holding it like he owns it. Like we’re a married couple and this is something we do. Touch each other under the table with a roomful of people present. I should probably whisper something to him like, ‘Would you mind taking-away your hand from where you’ve just put it, please? I’m not that kind of girl.’ But maybe I am that kind of girl. How am I supposed to know? Nothing like this has ever happened to me in my life.

“The cherries are a mix of sweet and sour,” Eve says to the table. “The last bloom before the raspberries. Who wants a little more?”

“Lead us not into temptation,” Warburton says from the table’s far end and raises his empty plate. “It’s too good to refuse. Cherry, please.”

“Same,” Tommy says.

“Since when do you like cherry?” Eve laughs.

“Nothing beats a warm slice of cherry pie,” Warburton says. “Miller knows what I’m talking about. Ain’t that right?”

“You’re goddamn right,” Tommy says. Eve lays a slice on his plate and he tucks a forkful to his mouth. His other hand starts to feel-up my thigh. The intimacy of his touch sparks something. I feel elated and exhilarated. I feel a deep sense of belonging to someone else. Daring and rebellious, and wildly mature.

I distractedly push my pie around my plate as he continues to feel up my thighs. My whole body breaks out in waves of sweat. I get that insane ache between my legs and everything feels like it’s glowing. Warm, wet, impatient, and urgent. He eases my thighs apart, as far as they’ll go in my skirt, which isn’t far enough for either of us. There’s something strong between us. This is undeniable. I want to grab his hand and hold it between my thighs, squeeze myself tightly against it, and keep it there forever. I want to dig into his fly, pull out his cock, and squeeze it in my hand. I want to sit in his lap, wrap my legs around him, and fuck him till I grow old and die.

He rubs me through my underwear, the center panel soaked with my wetness. It takes all of my willpower to control my breath, and to hold my body upright and still. He digs below my underwear and slides his finger into the split. It falls in as soon as he touches me. He squeezes the lips, slippery in wetness and plump with blood. He sets his finger against my little hole and I realize he’s about to go deeper. He’s going to fuck his finger into me, right here at the table. In front of everyone. A moment of reason returns to me before I’m too far gone to care. Get away from this, I tell myself. Get up. Get up, now! I bolt to my feet, my chair skidding and my fork clanging against the floor. I stand rooted to the spot, my eyes bright and my cheeks flushed. I feel everyone’s eyes on me.

“Something’s the matter?” Joel asks and looks me over with narrowed eyes.

I tug at my miniskirt hem. “I’m fine,” I say and glance at Tommy. He plucks a wayward cherry from his plate and slips it into his mouth. He looks at me and licks his fingers clean with a faint smile, mocking and defiant.

I need some fresh air, I realize. Legs trembling, I rush onto the porch and perch a teak swing at the far end. I spread my legs wide and trace the skin along the inside of my thighs, the lean muscle softened below a layer of flesh after one month of Jackson’s leisure. I press a hand between my legs, trying to feel what Tommy felt when he touched me, trying to imagine what he was thinking.
and feeling when his finger fell into me.

I’m overcome with the realization that someone new has come into my life who stirs my emotions and sparks my passion. When I’m around Tommy or I think about him, I feel a breathless deep surge of desire. He has a certain power, vitality, and position about him, and I’m attracted to this deeply. I can’t help it. I think anyone would be attracted to this. Everyone I know is half-dead with one foot already in the grave. He’s vibrant and vital.

The storm door swings open and someone steps onto the porch. Joel. It’s Joel. He holds his rifle low in his hand. I can tell by his manner he thinks I’ve run-off. Swiveling his head with his eyes looking everywhere at once. He only cares about me when I’ve run off. I suppose I’m in trouble. I suppose he brought his rifle with him because they’ve asked him to escort me back to the powerhouse. I’m not allowed to take the footpaths alone at night. Wolves, you know.

He spots me and perches the swing at my side. His manner’s soft and his muscles are slack, so I realize I’m not in trouble. He digs around his hair and shoves his bangs back from his forehead. “How’re you getting on?” he asks.

“I’m fine,” I say.

“Supper ain’t setting on your stomach right?”

“You don’t have to stay.”

“I reckon I’m staying and I expect no argument.”

I don’t respond, ambivalent. Half of me wishes he’d leave me alone and half is glad he’s here.

“How ’bout a walk?” he asks.

“I don’t feel like talking,” I say.

“I didn’t ask you to talk. You don’t even gotta think. Just walk.” He grabs a glass canning jar from the railing and offers it to me. I don’t like this gesture. It feels condescending, like he still sees me as a dumb little girl who does dumb little girl things like catch fireflies. He’ll never see me as anything but a child.

“I’m not a kid anymore,” I say.

He cocks his head. “Calculating you’ve still got another month or so.”

“I’m sixteen.”

“I was wondering,” he says and jostles the jar desultorily.

“Wonder no more,” I say. “It was a couple weeks ago.”

I can tell by the set of his lips he’s pretending to feel remorseful for forgetting my birthday. I know he doesn’t care. He hates birthdays. He’d be happy to get rid of them all together. Why should I like them, either? I don’t. I think they’re stupid. I don’t know if my birth date is even real. Maybe I’m really seventeen or eighteen. Or maybe I’m even younger than they told me. I don’t even know where I was born or if my name’s even my real name. My real age and place of birth could be completely different than what they told me for all I know. Who cares? It’s of no value to me. I take the jar from his hand. “It’s okay. I hate birthdays.”
“I don’t like them much, either,” he says and glances at his watch.

I follow him down the stairs. We walk along the riverbank in silence. I unscrew the jar’s lid and swipe it through the air, catching a couple fireflies. I hold it to the moonlight and watch them rocket its walls.

He halts at my side. “Miniature stars.”


“Might could be defensive. Might could be to attract a mate.”

“If they don’t light up, do they still attract one?”

“I suppose. Nature’s way.”

“How do they light up? And how come they don’t make heat?”

“Fireless illumination. Phosphorescence.”

“How come we don’t?”

“I reckon there’s something glowing inside all of us. A candle, a flame, a light. It might be turned so low, it’s invisible, but if you find the courage to blow on it, it turns into a mighty flame.”

“Not me.”

“What makes you so sure?”

I shrug. “I just don’t.”

“Ellie,” he says, his voice soft and tight. “Don’t you worry none.”

“Don’t you worry none what?”

“Just…don’t you worry. Do you understand?”

“No.” This is the truth. I have no idea what he’s talking about. What shouldn’t I worry about? I wasn’t worried before he said anything but now I’m full of worry.

He digs around his hair like he always does when he’s trying to figure out the right thing to say. He looks at me directly. “You know I ain’t the type to hedge around things with smiles and polite little lies. If things ain’t as they oughta be, it doesn’t help matters none by hiding your head under your wing. Wolves ain’t gonna slink off just ‘cause you stop looking at them. I reckon every man can see another man’s faults from a right far piece while his own are pretty damn near invisible, and I reckon you’re quicker at calculating them things, but sometimes it makes you see things where there’s nothing to see.”

I think about this and I'm nothing but confused. Is he talking about me? Himself? His brother? Eve? “I don’t get it,” I say.

“You’ll figure it out. A dog’s a dog. It doesn’t have to bark to prove it.”
Chapter Sixteen

I cross the Ark gates to frenzied black crows above a couple figures huddled at the reservoir drop-off. I get closer and realize it’s Eve and Langley, submerged thigh-deep in the water. They brace a Columbia sheep over the muddy drop-off, distressed and bleating. Its eyes have been pecked to red voids by the hungry crows cawing fretfully above, their dark wings snapping and roiling. An agitated lamb skitters on the shoreline and calls to its mother. She answers with a woeful wretched cry, her pendulous ears hung low and her cheeks matted with blood. My heart knifes over and over at this. I hate seeing this.

“She ain’t budging,” Langley says and looks at me. She gestures toward the Ark gates with her slender whipping branch. “Fetch me a Delta.”

I race back to the gates and call-out to Peavy and Gabbett stationed on sentry patrol in the guardhouse above. Before I can get the story out, a sharp whistle cuts across the footpath—Tommy’s whistle. He comes into earshot and asks, “What’s the ruckus?”

“A Columbia’s stuck in the drop-off,” I say. “She won’t budge.”

He cuts through the Ark gates and walks to the shoreline in wide purposeful strides. That steady confident gait like he’s out hunting quail. The long easy stalk of a panther. I picture Joel walking like this and it’s ridiculous. He strips down his rigging, empties his multicam pockets, and wades into the water. He and Langley haul the distraught sheep to the shore. Unable to rise, it bleats dishearteningly, its fleece stained in silty sludge, and its breast and hocks quivering.

My heart knifes. I clamp down hard on this feeling. Stop, I tell myself. No good comes from this feeling. They’re just dumb filthy animals who only live to fill their bellies until they fill ours. They have no feelings, no emotions, and no sentiments.

“She’s a goner,” Tommy says and unsheathes his boot knife.

“Not in front of the young one!” Eve yells. She picks-up the agitated lamb and carries it inland, its muddy legs dirtying her miniskirt.

Tommy crouches at the sheep’s head and addresses me. “Go on, get up.” He gestures at its muddy flank. I straddle it like a horse and hook my fingers through its fleece. It’s better this way, I tell myself. A quick easy death. It suffered the terror of the hungry crows and now it’ll find blessed peace in death. I start thinking of its little orphaned baby lamb and my heart knifes again.

Langley wrestles its bloody muzzle against her thighs and yanks back its head. I don’t want to look but I can’t look away. Tommy draws his fixed blade across its jugular furrow with disciplined muscled grace. A disconcerting gurgle, wet and panicked. Blood gushes over the back of his hand, lisps the embankment, and flows toward the water in a long thick snake.

See, I tell myself silently. That wasn’t so bad. Quick and painless. Think of all the good useful things the sheep’s sacrifice will bring. We’ll use its blood for chicken feed, and its cartilage for stews and broth. Its hide will be skinned, grained, fleshed, and tanned. Its toes and hooves will be dried and grated. Its head will be roasted for its brains and eyes, and its entrails will be fried. Its flanks will be dragged over flowering bushes to be sundried and smoked. And its stinky bladder
will be blown-up and tied at the neck for the Tau kids to knock around the powerhouse field. So many good and noble things from one loss of life.

We load it by its flanks into a wheelbarrow. Arms stained in blood from his hands to his elbows, Tommy grinds the carcass to the slaughterhouse where we splay it over a stainless-steel operating table and prepare rigging for a thorough overnight bleed-out. I push the wheelbarrow to the chicken coop, and tip the blood to the ground for the swarming Cornish Crosses and Red Rangers. When I return to the slaughterhouse, Langley’s in the middle of carving an exsanguination incision from its brisket to its jaw. She binds a steel shackle to its hind shank below the hock, clips-on a towing cable from an overhead beam, and cranks a hand-winches affixed to the wall.

As she rotates the handle, the lever grinds and brakes. It’s stuck. She curses and strains against the immovable gear. Nothing. The poor beast dangles over the table in a grotesque handstand. She pulls out a steel gambrel and a pulley hoist from a low cabinet. She starts to assemble it and tells me to go fetch Tommy. She’ll need his muscle for the manual haul-up. I offer to help her do it instead. She laughs like it’s a joke and tells me to get going.

I jog the field past the grazing livestock, searching for Tommy. I scour the stables, the paddocks, the calf shed, the chicken coop, the haysheds, and the tool shed. No Tommy. At the barn, I wind past a dozen shallow stalls cluttered with feeding troughs, feed bunks, and stock tanks. White Landrace and Holsteins lay in cool sandy pits with lazy swishing tails. No Tommy.

I hear soft faint voices coming from the far wall. Human voices. Male and female. A little giggle, a little coo, and a little murmur. In my head, I picture a Zeta and a Delta boot fooling around in the privacy and darkness along the back wall. There’s a long bench back there where they sometimes go to hook-up. I follow the voices past the tall tin cylinders of dairy milk until something catches my eye. Two figures sitting side-by-side on the bench. Tommy and Eve. She’s got her legs thrown over his lap and she runs a damp rag down his rust-red forearms. Our eyes connect. She makes a little squeal. She drops the rag and springs to her feet.

What are they doing? Why him and her? If Eve wanted to cover it up, I suppose she would’ve screamed something like, ‘Unhand me, you brute!’ So are they fucking each other or what? I can’t figure it out and I honestly don’t care. It’s none of my business who fucks who. What business is it of mine if they’re up to no good? I want to forget what I saw as quickly as possible but Tommy’s not the type who’s going to let me do that, is he? No. He’s not that type at all.

He rises to his feet and looks at me with cold steady level eyes. “I reckon you’re wanting me for something?”

“The winch broke,” I say, my voice soft and apologetic. I don’t understand why my voice came out like this. I didn’t do anything wrong. “Langley needs you for haul-up.”

He addresses Eve. “Tell her I’ll be there directly.”

She heads for the slaughterhouse. He drops his assault plate carrier over his shoulders and rakes his hair from his temples. He’s in no hurry but I’m impatient to go. I don’t like his manner. I don’t like what I saw and I don’t want to think about it. I want to forget it as quickly as possible. I take a tentative step backward and glance toward the slaughterhouse.

“Now don’t go running off,” he says. He ambles toward me with his shotgun swung low. He halts in front of me with his chin tipped arrogantly aloft. “What do you say we sorta talk things over?”

“Talk what over?” I ask, my mouth arid.
“You ain’t never seen nothing happen here, yeah?”

“Yeah,” I say. I make a dismissive shrug. No big deal. Whatever, Tommy.

“I’ll come for you if I find you’ve been opening your big mouth and butting into my business. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes, Tommy.”

“Well, you can think about that later, ‘cause right now, I’m wanting to tell you something.” He massages his chest kit. “I’m fixing on heading a run tomorrow outside the wire, me and some brothers. I reckon you’ll come along on point.”

“Point?” I ask, incredulous, my eyes widening in disbelief.

“I mean what I say.”

Point! A woman on point! Who ever heard of such a crazy thing? Ask any Delta and they’d say it’s better to put the Devil himself on point! Point’s one of the most coveted roles here, a tactical overwatch position for supply and hunting missions outside the wire. It’s only ever been granted to newly-initiated Deltas—and only the most eagle-eyed and brave of them. Not only is it considered bad luck to put a girl on point but it’s scandalous. Only Tommy could get away with it. A girl should be at Jackson, waiting for her man to return. Preparing his meals, doing his laundry, or pleasing him in the bedroom. Men are supposed to be strong, tough, and good fighters. What’s the sense in this? Hell yes, I’ll go on point!

Tommy draws himself up full length. “Listen here,” he says, “you keep your goddamn mouth shut or there’ll be hell to pay. Don’t say nothing about nothing. Are we clear?”

One thing’s certain here. Everyone’s mouths will already be open, talking about Tommy, wondering if he’s lost his goddamn mind. Putting a girl on point, they’ll say. Has he lost his goddamn mind? Is he crazy? Does he have a death wish? Is he trying to tempt the Devil himself? What kind of foolishness is this, bringing a girl outside the wire on point?

I always thought the bad luck stuff was made-up so women couldn’t go on point because if they did, they’d see how easy it was. With no women around to witness it, the men can continue to brag about how dangerous and brave going outside the wire is. Hauling back precious bagged game and supplies while fighting-off roving bands of rebels and infectids. Which never happens. Rebels would see the Deltas coming a mile away, take one look at their big broad kitted-up bodies, and run for the hills. That aside, I don’t believe in luck. Or fairies or ghosts or anything I can’t see with my own eyes or hear with my own ears. I’m going on point. Luck can go fuck itself, good or bad. Whatever the Deltas can do, I can do, too. And I’m going to prove it—

Crack! Without warning, Tommy lashes me across the face with his sweaty open palm. I cry out and stumble backward. I fall to the ground on my ass, my balance offset by the unexpected blow. What’d he do that for? What’d I do to him?

“Are we clear or ain’t we clear?” he yells. “Speak up, child!”

“Clear!” I yell. I caress my stinging swollen cheek. Dazed, shocked, and reeling. He didn't hit me hard but I’ve never been slapped across the face. Something about it’s deeply infuriating and humiliating. Hateful tears brighten my eyes. Anger churns deep. I throttle back burning twisting rage in choking sputtering gasps.

“Something else you’re wanting to say to me?” he asks.
I cover my mouth, stifling a sob.

“I didn’t think so,” he smirks. “I’m warning you. Don’t you be running me down to no man, you hear me?” He looks at me hard and saunters past.
Chapter Seventeen

I raise the collar of my long-sleeved work shirt against the chill. It’s the last clear hours of moonlight. Mays and Matheson’s voices murmur placidly on overnight sentry guard duty from the guardhouse above. Stars lace the sky, and crickets and whippoorwills trill the air.

My eye’s drawn to a couple flashlights slashing through the soft mist, coming from the direction of the powerhouse. I watch as half-a-dozen shadowed figures draw near and coalesce into a group of kitted-up Deltas.

“Ellie?” a baritone voice yells—Joel’s voice. I wondered all night who was coming outside the wire with us and now I know. Joel’s coming. I’m conflicted about this. I suppose I should be happy he’s coming but I don’t feel happy. He breaks from the men and halts in front of me. He scans my face with his flashlight like he’s trying to figure out if I’m really Ellie or a hallucination or a body double, or what. I wiggle my baseball cap visor low to block the light. “What are you doing here?” he asks, his voice bewildered, the tone high and tight.

“I’m on point,” I say.

He sputters disbelief.

Deltas fan his sides. “The fuck you are,” Chapman sneers. “Ain’t bringing no Zeta outside the wire. Go back to bed, little girl!”

Coffey, Maxwell, and Patton smile derisively. What’s so funny about this? If a Delta can do it, so can I. Besides, I have the protection of—one, two, three, four, five—five Deltas. We’re just missing Tommy—and here he comes, walking down the footpath. “Howdy, fellas!” he yells as he breaks into earshot. He’s dressed like the other men. Kitted-up with 5.11s bloused over lace-up assault boots and an M4 overhanging his shoulder from a sling. I feel practically naked in my sneakers and jeans but it’s the best gear I’ve got. Below my jeans, I’ve holstered my .380 ACP pistol to my ankle. It violates every rule but I wouldn’t dare go outside the wire unarmed, even in the company of the Deltas.

Joel grabs my arm. Before I can react, he strides purposely toward his brother, dragging me along. I fight against him. “Let go of me!”

“You keep outta this!” he yells.

I go quiet and go along with him because I don’t want to make a scene. It would only make things worse. Stop treating me like a child, I yell at him silently. You’re embarrassing me! I won’t go back to the powerhouse defeated. I won’t renege going outside the wire. I won’t cede overwatch to an unmerited Delta boot.

Tommy squares in front of us and addresses Joel. “Something bothering you, brother?”

“Wanna tell me the meaning of this?” Joel asks.

“It means whatever you goddamn please.”
“You put her on point, I take it?”

“You’ve taken it correctly.”

“So that’s how it is, yeah?”

“It appears like,” Tommy says. “Now what are you gonna do about it?”

“I don’t know what’s coming off, Tommy, but I’m warning you. There’s gonna be a mess of trouble about this.”

“No one asked you to stick your nose into my business.”

“I’m only trying to warn you.”

“I’ll handle my business without your warnings.”

“Folks’ll be asking questions.”

“Let ‘em get fussed-up,” Tommy says. “Whatever thinking they’re doing won’t amount to much. They won’t be getting any answers.” He starts heading toward the gates and Joel shoves him back. They square toward each other, neither man moving nor speaking. The Deltas don’t dare interfere.

Joel starts stripping-off his rigging and load-out. We all know what this means. He wants to duke it out, man-to-man. He intends to fight Tommy. “Shuck your gear, Tommy!” he yells and tosses down his plate carrier. Thud! I almost laugh at this. Such melodrama between big strong capable men. It’s a bluff, is what we’re all thinking. Tommy’s word’s as good as Joel’s. Better, even, because it’s his settlement. His word’s the law. If Tommy says I’m going— I’m going. He never goes back on his word. When he makes a promise, he keeps it, even if he’s wrong.

Tommy stands rigid, his muscles gathered-up for action. He hasn’t removed a single piece of rigging nor laid down his load-out. He has no intention of fighting Joel. This is clear. They stare at each other with blazing eyes and lips raised to clenched teeth till Tommy breaks the silence. “Pick-up that goddamn rig!” He jabs a finger at Joel’s discarded kit. “Pick it up!”

Joel doesn’t move nor speak.

Tommy braces his hips, his eyes flashing a hard bright light. “I’m getting sick of your damned dramatics, brother. If it’s a fight you’re looking for, I ain’t accommodating you.”

“You’re right,” Joel says and picks up his plate carrier. “It wouldn’t do. You know I fight fair.”

The tension in the air dissipates. You can almost feel everyone exhaling a deep sigh of relief and everyone’s muscles unclenching.

“Now look here, brother,” Tommy says. “I ain’t laying it all out for you but I’mma tell you this much. I reckon you and me’ll fight it out one of these days, man-to-man, but today ain’t the day. Now get this fixed in your damn head. I’m heading this run and I’m running it my way. You dress offa me. You don’t like it, stay back. Do as you damn please. The girl comes.” He storms toward the gates and yells at the Deltas. “The fuck y’all looking at? Grab your shit and let’s go!”

I’m in awe of Tommy’s authority. For all of his flaws, he’s a man of his word. Capable, vital, determined, and inflexible. Among the Deltas he’s a masterful leader and commands their respect. Joel treats me like a possession that needs his protection. Tommy’s the first man to approach me like a young capable woman.
He slides his thumb and forefinger to his mouth, and spirits a piercing whistle toward Mays and Matheson in the guardhouse above. Open these damn gates, this whistle says. Mays unlatches the iron bolt and swings them open. Matheson leans over the rails with a beaming smile. “Only one rule of runs, brothers,” he says. “Come back alive. Be safe out there, brothers.”

Brothers. I run with men and command rank between the Deltas. I feel like the biggest smartest toughest coolest girl in the world. Anyone in Boston would be like, ‘Running around the mountains with a bunch of redneck cowboys ‘n’ shit? Dirty smelly men who fuck their own horses? How wicked fucking queer can you get?’

We cut across the Ark knoll to the stables redolent of leather, manure, and hay. In the pre-dawn hours, livestock hasn’t started clamoring for feed. We tack-up a chestnut Tennessee Walking gelding with an open-back two-wheeled wooden cart. Deltas lay long-handled mud-caked tools into the flatbed and a bunch of poly gas cans. We’ll use them to haul back brine for our salt supply from a precious salt lick up at the springs. Tommy hands me a machete, and says it’s for clearing underbrush and stripping kindling. I feel my face brightening with pride but I clamp down on it. I sheath it to my thigh and follow the Deltas to the perimeter fence topped with razor wire.

Tommy slaps a weathered map to the cart rails. Patrol brief. “Arkwright Valley, due southeast,” he says and trains his flashlight to a fringed mountain bowl threaded in blue ribbons. “Cresskill country. Could be hot. Keep your heads on swivels. If we start taking direct, unload. Far ambush, take cover.”

Deltas grunt affirmation. My stomach jitters. This is why Joel was so upset with Tommy putting me on point. Cresskill is why. He wasn’t overreacting. We’re headed into the Arkwright valley where Caden and the Cresskills dwell. The risk is real. I soften toward Joel. Either Tommy made the offer of point in bad faith or he truly thinks I’m up to the challenge. It doesn’t matter. I’m still going all the same.

Starshine bleaches grey and a rim of milky light bleeds over the eastern sky. Under the rising sun, we cut across an open meadow. The sun rises and slants. My eyes are everywhere, on everything. I want to see, hear, and feel everything. I feel like I haven’t been outside the wire in years, like I was just released from prison. I can’t hold myself still.

My exhilaration is cut short. The annoying headache I had all night starts to pound maliciously. Soon enough I fall behind the division. My face flushes and a strong wave of nausea descends. Not now, I tell myself. Please not now. The nausea won’t be willed away. I stumble to a halt and brace my knees. My shoulders spasm and I retch over a bed of wildflowers. There’s nothing to throw-up. My stomach’s empty.

I hear Tommy’s sharp whistle and I look up. The outfit’s halted. Someone must’ve noticed me puking. The Deltas fan around the cart and roll their hips to redistribute their combat loads. Tail swishing, the horse swings its head low and snuffles dandelions. I think about the horse’s mouth and I retch again, bringing up a little foam and the taste of my stomach.

Tommy shouts at Joel and jabs an accusatory arm in my direction. I can’t hear what he’s saying. Joel smiles blandly, shakes his head, no, and crosses his arms over his chest. Even though I can’t hear him, I know what he’s saying. His manner says it all. I told you so, it says. You should’ve listened to your older smarter wiser brother. You should’ve never put Ellie on point. She’s a weak dumb stupid girl. Look at her, puking her guts out over a bed of flowers! She can’t even go an hour without being a damn nuisance!

Tommy strides over to me purposely and stands in front of me. His hard eyes broadcast sullen disgust. “Get up, girl,” he says. “Get up!”
I untuck my legs and start to rise.

“Get off your goddamn ass and get your shit together.” He grabs my arm and jerks me to my feet.

“I don’t know what happened,” I say, massaging my arm where his fingers sunk deep. This is a lie. I know what happened. I spent a sleepless night in the outhouse suites with loose bowel actions. You know, the shits. I’m dehydrated and running on no fuel. I didn’t dare ask Tommy when step-off was so I was already waiting at the gates for an hour before the men showed-up.

“Don’t speak!” he yells, his neck roped and his lips set hard, straight, and obstinate. This look could kill me, it could. “Don’t look at me,” he says, “don’t talk to me. Don’t say a fucking word! First time putting a girl on point outside the wire. I’m hauling around goddamn deadweight! Figure it the fuck out! Grab your shit and move!” He stalks-off toward the division.

Tears spring to my eyes. I feel lower than something on the bottom of my shoe. He hates me. My face burns with contempt. His rejection feels like someone’s struck-off a light. Like a switch striking off. On. Off. On. Off. It’s over. It’s done. There’s no feeling between us. I hate him. I just hate him. I pull an aluminum water bottle from my pack with trembling hands and rinse my mouth with sweet river water, redolent of green leaves and twigs. I jog toward the Deltas on shaky legs and regain their pace. Joel jogs to my side. Please go away, I beg him silently. Please leave me alone. I don’t feel like talking to you right now.

“Well, you got what you wanted,” he says. “What more do you want?”

I don’t respond. He’s entitled to gloat. I’d gloat, too, if I were in his shoes.

“Ain’t feeling talkative right now?” he asks.

I don’t respond.

“We’ll rustle-up some grub when we get to Arkwright.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Tommy’s not always easy to anticipate but I reckon on the whole you’ll be alright once you’ve had a little practice being back outside the wire.”

“I had a rough night.”

“Has it got something to do with that mark on your face?”

“It’s nothing.” I press my hand over my bruised cheek.

“Slipped in the bathtub?”

“I fell. I wasn’t watching and I—”

“You don’t gotta go into detail,” he says, interrupting me. “It’s plain enough as it is.”

I run my hand down my ponytail and flick the ends defiantly. He can think whatever the hell he wants to think.

“Well, I hope you hit him back,” he says. “I hope you got him good. Keep away from a man who raises a hand to a woman, no matter the provocation. If a man hits a woman, there’s no telling what else he’d hit.” We jog in silence till he speaks again. “Tommy give you that blade?” He means the machete sheathed to my thigh.
“For clearing brush,” I say.

“Whether you’re fixing on whittling a toothpick or felling a tree, hew with both hands. Keep your feet outta the way when you’re axing.”

“I know how to use it.” I’m being ungracious. A little shit. I know this. I can’t help it.

“Straight-on south!” Tommy yells. “On the other side of the crest, up over the rise.”

I follow the men up a sloped hill of timber. Cast-off decayed moose antlers litter the undergrowth. We hike the rise and halt on the summit, one of two large hills framing a long sunbathed valley dotted with ancient trees and lowland brush. Arkwright Valley. It’s beautiful. A million times more beautiful than Jackson. The Carters should’ve stayed here to raise horses with its clean water and plentiful grass. Below the brilliant cloudless blue sky, a narrow brook tasseled in sedge snakes the valley floor and crimps into a large oxbow. Large antlered game lounge the sunny banks of the grassy bowl. They’re too far away to tell what type.

Tommy glasses the basin’s sweeping curves with his rangefinders. “Moose,” he says. “Ain’t shy critters. Easier to kill than to track.”

He tells Patton and Chapman to turn the horse loose. The cart will be left here. It can’t travel over this kind of ground. Harnesses unbuckle and fall away, and he hands me the horse’s reins. He tells me to stand the horse beneath a lone cluster of firs halfway down the valley. When he tosses-up his red bandana, it means all’s clear and I can join them. The Deltas trail him toward the valley floor.

Joel tarries at my side. “It ain’t decent,” he says more to himself than to me.

“What’s not?” I ask.

“June and July’s closed season. Too close to mating and breeding. Any bird or beast out there’s got food in its mouth or its claw for its little ones.”

“We need the meat,” I say.

“It ain’t fair play. Chances ain’t equal. It’s cowardly to take an unfair advantage.”

“Killing’s necessary if you wanna hunt.”

“There’s no satisfaction in killing if you can’t outwit the game you’re trailing.”

Joel’s not being soft-hearted. His reticence doesn’t come from a place of tenderness or compassion. He’s a supreme sportsman and he only kills fair. I learned this drifting. If he felt like bagging a nice plump prairie chicken hen for dinner and it was during mating season, he’d make sure to locate her chicks first before killing her to make sure they were old enough to fend for themselves. He’s that kind of sportsman.

He unholsters his revolver, cycles the cylinder, swings it closed, and hands it to me. “He may’ve cottoned you up with that piece,” he says, meaning my machete, “but it ain’t worth a good goddamn.”

I take his revolver and slip it to strong-side appendix carry. I don’t bother thanking him. It’d be like thanking the sun for shining on your crops. The sun’s just doing what it was born to do.

“If you run into trouble, give a holler,” he says and jogs toward the division.
“I’ll be fine!” I yell after him. I’d better be. I lead the horse to the tall fir cluster and stand him beneath the needled mantles. I grate his shining coat. Please be quiet and still, Mr. Horse, I say to him silently. Please be good. I don’t want to fuck up again. I want to make these men proud of me. I want Joel to be proud of me. I want to prove I’m equal to the Delta boots and worthy of the honor of point.

In the oxbow, cows graze and calves splash the brook. Bulls dredge roots from the water, shake their antlers, and bellow placidly. Joel’s right about one thing. It’s a shame to interrupt such tranquility. The men breach the bowl in wedge formation with their assault rifles raised to combat-ready. Tommy swings his arm straight above his head and drops it to his thigh, his signal to shoot.


A mature bull lowers its head, tears the earth with its broad branched antlers, and rockets toward Joel. Pack! The bull plunges forward, crashes headlong, and collapses into a heap. The men throw warning shots toward the herd’s hooves, kicking-up sprays of dirt. Moose stream from the bowl in a stampeding snorting mass, galloping in a full-on throttle.

The Deltas jog into the oxbow with their guns slung over their shoulders. Tommy turns in my direction and puts his fingers into his mouth to whistle. I wait for the sound to reach me. Come on down, this whistle says. I wave to him but immediately wish I hadn’t. He waves his red bandana over his head in response.
I refresh the reins in my hand and lead the horse to the bowl. I tie him to a tree by the brook, unbridle him, and tack-up a padded halter.

Signs of the slaughter are everywhere—clumps of long brown fur, bloody streaks, and giant cleft-hoof tracks. The moose that had been so majestic frolicking in the stream with their calves are nothing but big dead pieces of meat. I find Joel kneeled over the bull he cut down. He strokes it with admiring hands, its grey muzzle and its grand antlers fringed in velvet.

“Nice shot,” I say, noticing the clean bullet hole a couple inches above his heart. “That’s a fine moose.”

“Ain’t moose no more,” he says. “That there’s venison.” He’s being cocky. He’s pleased with himself. With such a smooth kill, I’d be pleased with myself, too.

The Deltas prepare to field dress their kill. They strip down to their 5.11s and blouse them to their knees. Tommy tells me to prepare a big log cooking fire with a moderate steady burn and no smoke. No problem. Joel taught me everything about wood lore. How to yield a good bed of coals and how to keep it from going dead. Which wood doesn’t split or pop. Green from seasoned and hard from soft. It took a lot of blistered hands, scorched clothes, and eyes blinded with smoke before I learned. Meat covered in ashes, and overcooked or undercooked on fires built too large and hot.

When the men finish field dressing, they hoist the carrion into low branches with paracord to protect the exposed flesh from predatory birds. Crows drop from their moorings onto the blood-saturated grass, cry harshly, and peck at the tangled entrails. The men squat along the bank and bathe their blood stained bodies. They fill their canteens and submerge them below the water, marked by a stake driven into the bedrock.

Coffey sparks the fire with a flint and steel striker. I crouch downwind and catch the feeble flames with twigs until they form a bright leaping fire. Patton lays the quartered moose fillets over hickory slabs licked in flames. While it cooks, I wind ropey strings of fat and shredded flesh around whittled saplings, sear them over the fire, and pass them around to the men. Patton pulls the moose quarters from the flames and lays them over plates I made from the green undersides of smooth seamless birch rinds. I sprinkle the meat with coarse salt from a small buckskin pouch and pass the plates around. When I get to Joel, he levels the handle of his straight-edge blade at me. He’s offering me the first cut. “You’re not hungry?” I ask.

“Go on,” he says.

“Are you sure?”

“Grind it down.” He beckons the blade toward me.

The men eat in contented silence, scraping moose flesh from the bones with fixed blades. Tommy wipes his greasy face and neck with his bandana, and addresses me. “Go on, fetch that pop-skull right quick.”
He wants the thermos of rye whisky cooling in the brook. I walk to the water and pull-up a stainless-steel thermos of what I hope is the whisky he wants. At my back, I hear footsteps approaching. It’s not Joel. I know his stride. Whoever it is, I can practically feel their eyes boring into my back, like there’s a cold spot right between my shoulders where it’s hitting me.

I turn to look and it’s Chapman, dark and handsome with an arrogant swagger. I don’t know him. I never really talked to him before but I’ve seen him around the powerhouse. He crouches at my side and pulls his canteen from the water. “I don’t mind telling you,” he says. “I’m admiring your company—admiring it a lot. I’ve been watching you a while, noticing you the last couple weeks. Something about you makes me feel like we could make a go of it. Just say the word.”

I swear I feel Joel’s eyes boring into my back, so I glance at him over my shoulder to find I’m right. He stares at me with his chin thrust forward and his hand clawed over his holstered revolver. He doesn’t look away when I look at him. It’s what he wants. He wants to make himself known. He wants me to know he’s watching. None of the other men pay attention to me or my whereabouts. They could care less. They push away their birch rinds and jab their gristle-coated blades into the soil to clean them.

“I want you and I aim to have you,” Chapman says and shifts his weight impatiently. “Ain’t you admiring my company?”

I think about this for a moment. I don’t want anything to do with him. This is where a coquettish Zeta would give him a withering look, toss her hair, and cut him down to size. Tell him she won’t be impressed or swayed. Make some withering innuendo about his dick size and its inability to satisfy a woman. I’m not one of those girls. I want to make it clear I won’t play games with him, so I tell him straight up, “I don’t want you.”

“So I don’t grade-up?” he asks.

“You’ll never have me.”

He smirks and pulls himself up full length. Insolence, arrogance, and contempt alight his slightly-slanted eyes. “Well, every man’s free to play his own hand.”

I start to walk back to the fire. He saunters to my side and wrenches me to a halt by my arm. Before I can ask him what the fuck’s his problem, he says, “I’ll bet you think I’m a damn fool.” His cheeks are flushed and his lips are pouting. “Well, think whatever you like. I ain’t nobody’s fool. You ain’t to blame for the life you lived. That’s a man’s fault.” He means Joel. This is clear. “You’re getting too old to keep a foster daddy watching over you. He’s dug a deep hole and he keeps you down there, away from the company he doesn’t want you to keep. He doesn’t want you getting thick with roughnecks like me, yeah?”

Anything I say would just make him angrier so I don’t respond. I know this about men like him. He’s one step away from calling me a skank. A slut. A whore.

“At a certain point, it comes down to you,” he says. “You’ve gotta decide one way or another. Do you wanna live your own life or the life he wants for you?”

My cheeks flush in anger. “That’s none of your fucking business.”

He laughs derisively. “When you finally make-up your mind and start doing your own thinking and deciding for yourself, lemme know.” He twists the thermos from my hand. “But if you hold out much longer, I might just knock him down and drag you out from underneath him. I was born by the pussy and I don’t mind dying by it.” He laughs and heads back to the fire, and I follow. He sits
at Coffey’s side and unscrews the thermos. Before he can take a sip, Coffey yanks it from his hand.
“What the fuck, Coffey?” he yells.

“That’s for butchering a cow,” Coffey says. “No man kills a female or a child unless he needs the meat.”

“We’re eating her, ain’t we?” Chapman asks.

“We’re leaving her for the wolves,” Tommy says and gestures at his rind piled with gristle and bone. “That there’s Joel’s bull.”

“Sight-in that rifle, son,” Coffey says, referring to Chapman’s .223-caliber semi-automatic rifle laid at his side. “Tex’s Girl could’ve taken a better shot from way up yonder, between her legs with her eyes closed.”

Everyone laughs. I lower my eyes but I don’t get upset. Coffey’s not being a dick. It’s just his way.
Everyone likes him. He’s tall, slender, and clean-shaven with a lean square jaw and thick silver hair clipped high and tight. His eyes are grey, genial, and perpetually-squinting. It’s hard to tell how old he is but he’s older than Joel. He passes around the thermos of whisky to the men. Each wipes the neck with their t-shirts before they drink from it.

“You couldn’t hit a barn if you were standing inside of it,” he says to Chapman. “Couldn’t hit a deer if he swallowed your barrel.” He pulls-out a corn-husk cigarette from a tin and lights it from a sapling. “Where’d you learn to shoot?” he asks him.

“Reckon I just learned,” Chapman says. “Bagged my first buck the summer before the Critical up at our lake house. Lost my V-card that same night to an Australian au-pair, fine as fuck, sweet sixteen, juicy tits and tight cakes. That rack sat pretty as fuck bouncing around on my bed. She stripped down to her thong and told me to fuck her so I turned her around and banged her raw. Sounded like a screen door in a hurricane!”

Joel draws a sharp breath through his teeth. He hates this kind of vulgar bragging, especially in front of me.

“Player!” Patton yells at Chapman.

“I live by one simple rule,” Chapman says. “Never say them three little words.”

“I love you?” Patton asks.

“You look fat.” Chapman laughs at his dumb joke. “That pussy made me damn near lose my mind.” He shakes his head, no, and soberes. “My room looked out over the lake. My bed was right up under the window. I woke-up at dawn to take a piss and saw a big buck standing there with the fog lifting-off the water. I didn’t even have to get up. Just pulled up my rifle, inch by inch, and shot him from the window. The round went straight through his heart and clean out the other side. He went down like he was struck by lightning.”

“Beginner’s luck,” Coffey says.

“My old man ran upstairs,” Chapman says, “hollering and cursing till he saw that big trophy bleeding-out on the front lawn. He loved that goddamn lake. Went up there to connect with the wilderness, recharge his batteries, cool his heels and cool his head.” He looks at Coffey. “You and him would’ve been good buddies, tracking big game.”

“He had a hound?” Coffey asks.
“Sarge,” Chapman says. “An English Pointer, black and white. He was bitten by a copperhead, hit an artery in his neck, drove the poison straight in.”

“Field trained?”

“He retrieved any kinda shot game, land or sea, track whatever left a strong scent.”

“Like my Rogue,” Coffey says. “She was an English Setter. White groundwork with small chestnut tufts, built like the very definition of the line. Long but not thick. She inherited her mother’s good blood—cheerful, obedient, and brave. She had a rare intelligence and could hold point all day. She had a fine bird sense and could carry the lightest scent. Hell, she could pick up a cold track on dry sand in a hurricane! She anticipated whatever I needed or wanted before I told her, and she could read my moods better than anyone who knew me. The perfect bitch.” He laughs. “Whether I owned her or she owned me’s still up for debate. I learned the hard way not to run hounds on a black bear.”

“Them big old cuddly teddy bears?” Chapman asks.

“Not a brown, not a grizzly,” Coffey says. “A great American black.” He takes a long drag of his cigarette and exhales the smoke through his nose. “Back before every tooth, claw, and horn I ever killed was tracked across this leathery old hide, I got the notion to shoot-up noble game, reckoned there was great glory to be had in bagging them big old brutes prowling around the forest, bear-hugging folks to death.

“Now, the only time to hunt them’s right before denning-up when they’re at their fattest and laziest, so the September of my twenty-fifth year, me and Rogue spent a weekend chasing-out a boar through brush so thick, you couldn’t even fall down if you tried. We tracked him for days and ran him around, Rogue snapping at his heels. He backed himself up against a boulder and raised himself up to ten feet tall, jaws foaming and Rogue baying at a respectful distance. Like a bolt of lightning, he struck out a giant paw full of sharp hooked claws. He drew her up, stuck his long snout straight-up into the air, and smashed his paws together. She was dead before she hit the ground—snapped her back clean in half. Can’t say I miss my wife but I still miss that damned dog. She was the pride of my heart.”
Coffey passes Tommy the flask and asks, “What about you and Tex? Y’all bagged some longhorns back in the day?”

“We might got some fables,” Tommy says. “Ever heard of the golden goose?” He and Joel share a knowing smile, and he continues, “We had a client, kinda like an uncle. He let us launch his luxury cruiser whenever we had the notion. A seventy-foot motor yacht. Four staterooms, a state-of-the-art galley, half-a-dozen heads, and the comfiest loungers on the front casting deck that you ever laid on. In the flybridge rigging station he kept a treasure map to a secluded bay past a shingly beach, a huge sand bar cut by two narrow waterways. By day, it was full of weeds and sand lice, the shores choked in thickets. By night? Hundreds of wild geese came to feed.

“That night started-off like any other. We headed out before sunset and sliced through the chop. When the sun went down, we cut the motor and dropped anchor. Stealth mode. We each took a side of the bow, laid back on our loungers with our shotguns in our arms, and watched the moon and stars come up, floating and tossing with the incoming tide, waiting for in-flying game.”

Joel takes over the story. “Under that darkness and stillness, you could hear everything gliding through the water. Every ripple and every stir of wind. Every breath of every animal, big and small. You could almost feel the blackness pressing down around you. When the mist came rolling off the water, we pulled up our guns and started swiveling for them dark Vs.”

Tommy smiles and knifes his hands aside his mouth. “Quonk! Quonk!” he yells, imitating a goose. “They were miles away but in the darkness, they sounded like they were right on top of us. We scanned the sky till a big black wedge was printed against the twilight.”

Joel takes over. “They rode-in like thunder, winging their way diagonally. We waited to feel the wind of their wings on our faces and turned our guns loose.” He swings up an imaginary shotgun and pantomimes a shot. “Fat geese came hissing down in big dusky loads, wings crashing into the water with a huge splash and thudding against the sand, quills and feathers floating and twirling down at our feet. We filled our bag limit and pulled them from the water.”

Tommy continues. “After that, we usually headed back to the loungers to wait for the next squad to come-in. Lay back and watch the smaller game glide by, and listen to them streaming over the sand flats, hundreds of beasts feeding and hollering. That night when we got to the loungers, we saw this big thing glowing-up through the darkness, sitting right on Joel’s chair. It was a big fat goose. But that wasn’t the strangest part. It was covered in gold feathers. A golden goose with a huge head and golden wings!

“I chambered a shell thinking it’d fly off and this dead silence came down, deathly still, all around us. I sent up a slug and the air exploded with a roar! Hundreds of geese took flight against the wind in a huge rush of wings, honking and retreating in squadrons, flying back and forth in total chaos like they were ripping out the gates of Hell! I looked over at Joel’s lounger and what do you know? He was still sitting there! Joel walked up to him real slow and picked him up like a Tang vase. Like an Aztec statue. He took him in his hands, turned him around and around, and threw him high in the air. He winged-off, flashing them golden feathers.”
“Now ain’t that something?” Chapman sneers.

“Well, who’re you gonna believe?” Coffey asks him. “The men who saw it, heard it, and felt it? Or the doubter who was thousands of miles away when it happened?”

“Boy, I’ll tell you what,” Joel says to Chapman. “After that scattershot, you best keep your mouth shut.”

“I done killed,” Chapman says.

“That piece never saw a clean kill in its goddamn life,” Joel says. “Coffey downed her. You broke her leg.”

“She was running like a flash,” Chapman says.

“I reckon a shot travels a lot quicker than them beasts,” Joel says, “and bullets are pretty near precise. You miss a shot, it’s your fault. Not the gun, not the ammo, not the game, not the wind. Can’t blame nothing but the man behind the gun.”

“Hunting’s instinct,” Chapman says. “We’re men of blood, born hunters. We’ve been doing it since we were cavemen.”

“And now we’re civilized,” Joel says. “Ain’t no law that governs man but the law of the land.”

“Ain’t no laws no more!” Chapman yells. “The only law’s the law of survival!”

“Killing ain’t a fluke,” Joel says. “If a hunter can’t get close enough for a sure clean shot, he’s got no business being on the field. I’d rather have good clean sport or none at all.”

“Nobody gives two shits what you want, old man!” Chapman yells. “I reckon you’re the only sonofabitch alive who hasn’t changed with the change of the world.”

Joel’s muscles tense with reflexive readiness preceding violence. Chapman must want to get his ass kicked, is what we’re all thinking. Coffey must think it, too, because he levels an authoritative finger at Chapman and says, “Now listen here, son. Tex is a gentleman and a gentleman never insults nobody personally. The man of justice hates the crime, not the criminal. That there’s a true sportsman. He loves the field for the sake of sport. Not for meat, hides, heads, or horns. He’s gotta genuine love of the chase and a full respect for the rights of the hunted. He fights fair. You, son? Only when you’re obliged to do so.”

“So how’d you get you some, old man?” Chapman asks him.

“I shot for count,” Coffey says. “Didn’t care for a mess of small trophies but the one better than my best. I wouldn’t go hunting unless I was sure I’d bag more than a couple whitetail. I needed incentive for sleeping in wet clothes in a cold tent, up all night from howling coyotes and hungry mosquitoes, a hundred miles from a real toilet and a hundred more from a cold beer.”

“I was bang-for-my-buck,” Patton says to no one in particular. He lifts his baseball cap and grates his short blond hair. “Never cared to go far afield unless I had to. As much rapid action as I could cram into a short weekend. Results talked. The bigger the pile of feathers, the deeper the pool of blood, the thicker the stack of hides, the better the proof. That all changed the day I shot my first elk, the finest trophy that’s ever fallen to my rifle. My in-laws booked us a hunting trip for our first anniversary, one of those luxury packages with helicopters, deluxe ATVs, and snowmobiles in scenic back country on a remote corner on the border. Base camp was a deluxe log cabin lodge with a personal chef and a stocked trout pond out back. Now to my wife, game’s game. Her idea of
a hunting trip was the spa and an open bar. Here we were in the heart of great elk game country and she’d picked a sheep-whitetail trophy combo. Man, I’d rather be in Hell with a broken back!”

“Them ivories,” Coffey says.

Patton laughs. “A true sign of a good hunter and I was hell-bent on getting my own, so I abandoned camp with just the pack on my back. I tracked all day, slept rough, and woke to perfect weather—damp enough for a scent to lie just right with no wind to drive it away. I came to a stream with fresh tracks everywhere, water still filling ‘em in, massive split hooves, saplings all chewed-up, and decayed horns everywhere. I stalked through rough timber and swamps up to my neck till I came on him at dusk—a fine old bull. He was a big-antlered king, four-hundred inches, sitting in the grass with his massive horns all tangled-up with vines. He looked at me calm like he was expecting me with his head straight-up. I brought up my rifle and shot him through the shoulder. He went straight down, no struggle. I pulled back his upper lip and carved out them beauties.”

He reaches under his t-shirt, pulls out a drawstring pouch on a leather thong, and shakes-out an elk tooth. “It’s been twenty-one years since I last kissed my wife. Bless her and bless her smile that lit up the room. The other one’s on a chain around her neck.” He tucks it back into the pouch. “That trip came at a cost—fines, fees, two years’ loss of license, dodged a lawsuit, and slept on the couch for a month—but it was worth it. I found liberty and fought for it. Rebelled against suits and ties, traffic, mortgages, bills, telemarketers, lawsuits, and taxes. I never understood this country, never felt like I belonged to it. I always felt like an outsider till that first taste of freedom. I learned the world belongs to those who take it. The right of every man to do as he damn pleases. Any man who knows that holds the world in his hands. We’re free men, born as free as all them critters on this great earth.”

I don’t understand when people talk like this. For all I learned of American history, the Old World had the most liberal laws in the world. A true democracy. The freest laws of speech, press, religion, guns, marriage—everything. Yet no one seemed to care or notice. Men like Patton are always reminiscing about how impossible everything was and how everyone felt like a prisoner of the government or billionaires or big industry. It’s one of those things I’ll never understand.

“Damn straight, brother,” Maxwell says and scratches his stubbly rust-colored beard. “All of those sacred places were taken by government men or bought by big industry—oil, gas, pharma, banks, tech. We were barred: no hunting, no fishing, no shooting, no trapping, no trespassing, private property—get lost!” He laughs. “All this land and game out yonder’s the common property of man. Born high, born low—free hearts are born free. This here’s America, and we’re entitled to the same freedoms and liberties as our forefathers.”

“What game did you run, Max?” Coffey asks him.

“Y’all know I ain’t much for talking about myself,” he says, “but I’ll give it a try. I was a trout man. Used to be my favorite to catch and eat. The quickest and the smartest. Lives in the cleanest waters with the cleanest spawning beds, the hardest to catch, and the toughest fighters. I spent the best summer of my life hunting them up with some old college buddies. We hit-up the undammed highlands at a big lake dropped in the middle of giant firs growing right up to the edge. We camped under the canopy with the fire glowing all night, and fell asleep to the sound of the tide lapping against the boats tied-up at the dock.

“The last day started out clear with a nice breeze blowing-in, but by the time we headed out, the sky started to cloud over. Down in the lower end, in a pool below a waterfall, the trout were flipping outta the water, tumbling after minnows and gnats. We hauled them in hand over fist till sunset when black storm cloudsanked-up. We tried waiting it out but the lightning was coming
down sideways with thunder at its heels, so we packed-up, soaked to the bone, and stopped at the first light we saw coming down the mountain, an old motor lodge run by a leatherneck widower. The Dew Drop Inn. He took a liking to us—two of my buddies were military brats. He brought us to his house out back and we traded some of our catch for his kitchen.

“Out came his daughter. She picked-up the cooler and gutted the trout like a samurai, sliced through them strong fins and pearly-white bellies like they were butter. She fried them up so delicate and crisp, I swear I never tasted real trout before. She took care of her old man like a king. Brought him his slippers, his whisky, and his reading glasses. Right then and there, I knew she’d be my wife.

“Folks always said I made a good angler ‘cause of my patience so I waited for her and she gave me the best ten years of my life, and three sons I didn’t deserve. She was the first woman in my life and she’ll be the last.” He drops his head to his chest. “Can’t angle trout no more,” he says, his voice tight with tears. “Can’t eat ’em, can’t smell ’em, can’t even look at ’em. Haven’t even dared to think about her for so many years.” He pulls to his feet and drifts idly away toward the brook.

“Reckon it’s time for a swim,” Tommy says. He grabs the flask, jogs to Maxwell’s side, and hands it to him. The Deltas rise and follow.
Joel loiters at my side. I feel him heavy with thoughts. Maybe Maxwell’s story dug something up from deep inside him. You can never tell with him. Just as he opens his mouth to speak, Chapman calls out to me on his way to the brook. “Coming for a swim, Ellie?”

“Don’t worry about her,” Joel says to him, his tone flat and authoritative. Chapman makes a twitching smile and continues toward the brook. Joel waits till he’s out of earshot to address me. “Why don’t you hang back and straighten-up?”

“Straighten-up what?” I ask, incredulous.

“Get rid of those rinds.” He gestures at the birch plates loaded with gristle and bones.

“We leave it for the wolves,” I say.

“Find something to busy your hands with.”

“But I wanna swim.”

“After.”

“After what?”

“After you clean up this mess and clean it up good. And when you’re done cleaning it up, do it again just to be sure.”

“Bullshit!” I yell. Joel’s after means never. After will never come.

“Ellie,” he says, his voice shimmered in threat. “Don’t rile me up.” He saunters off toward the brook shooting me a stern look.

My jaw tightens in anger. I know why he’s being like this. His old fashioned sense of modesty interferes with everything. Sometimes he’s as decorous as a nun. How many useless hours a day do you suppose he spends thinking about such nonsense things? Me being taken advantage of by men. Me being desecrated by men. Even one thought a day is too much. The fact is, no one would look at me twice in my underwear. There’s nothing vulgar about me. And even if I were well-developed with big tits and a juicy ass, why should I be ashamed of my body? I wouldn’t.

Chapman’s right about one thing. Joel’s put a fence around me. You can’t put a fence around a person. Maybe they did it in the Old World but you can’t do it now. He’s like a Victorian-era mum from Old England, preoccupied with her daughter's reputation, roughing-up potential suitors, and stomping-out malicious rumors to keep her immune from scandal. A watchdog, circling my feet on endless guard duty, pissing on everyone he doesn’t want around me. He thinks no one’s good enough for me. I tell myself to take a deep breath and count to ten, so I count to ten. I circle the fire pit, stack the birch plates to my chest, and hurl them beyond the oxbow along the valley wall. Eat up, wolves.

I return to the fire and pace desultory. I’m still angry. How many more times do I need to count to
ten today? Even one more time's too much. I watch the men in the brook. They splash around in their silkies and briefs, chatting and laughing. Tommy and Joel hoist onto the opposite bank and sit side-by-side with their legs submerged in the water.

It’s probably the most beautiful day we’ve had all summer. The wind’s soft and fragrant, the air’s clear, and the sky’s deep blue. The views are breathtaking. Arkwright Valley is pure splendor but it means very little to me. I don’t have many wants and needs in this world aside from being safe and clean, and right now, I’m none of that. I’m parched in heat and covered in ash, sweat, and gristle. I should be in that water, cool and clean. Not standing here alone like a filthy outcast, baking in the sun.

Just get through this, I tell myself. You can go for a swim when you get back to the powerhouse at the Great Lake. No. It’s not the same thing, is it? No, it’s not the same thing at all. I deserve the same privileges as the men. I don’t think it’s too much to ask. Fuck Joel and fuck his dumb rules. We’re outside the wire. He’s got no authority here. I hate indecision. Choose, dammit! I choose.

I walk toward the brook, glaring at Joel defiantly. He sits with his wet head tipped close to Tommy’s, deep in conversation. Tommy massages his chest hair, glistened in drops of water. Joel looks up and notices me approaching. His mouth pulls into a grim line and his jaw thrusts forward. Try to stop me, I tell him silently. You wouldn’t dare. I’ve earned this. I deserve this. You’re going to treat me like an equal—because I am.

I halt on the bank. Everyone stops talking to each other and looks at me, waiting to see what happens next. They don’t have to wait long.

“Ellie,” Joel says. “Get to feeding that horse.”

What’s this? What’s he talking about? I look at the horse and I have to stop myself from laughing. The horse grazes beneath a tree, his tail flicking contentedly. “He’s got pasture,” I say.

“If you ain’t gonna feed him, keep him moving. Hand-walk him. Take him around a couple times.” He gestures a wide circle around the oxbow.

Can you believe he said this? The horse doesn’t need turnout. He’s been moving all day and he’ll be moving all day till we get back. This is a fact.

“Ellie,” he says, his tone commanding. “Don’t just stand there with your head in the clouds. That horse ain’t gonna walk himself.”

He’s one step away from blowing-up at me. He can do this because he knows I’ll always forgive him. He can blow-off steam because he knows I’ll always understand him. We’ll have it out at some point but not now, because right now, I’m going for a goddamn swim.

I unbind my ponytail and shake my sweaty hair loose across my shoulders. I strip-down to my underwear and step into the brook. I bend over the water and splash it across my chest and face, gasping, my underwear sticking to my skin as it gets wet. So what. I gather my wet hair and wring it dry, glancing at the men as I do this. No one looks at me and no one speaks. Their eyes purposely look elsewhere—the horse, the horizon, the fire pit, their own feet. I suppose I’ve made everyone uncomfortable. I don’t care.

Chapman breaks the silence. “See, at first I wasn’t convinced putting Tex’s Girl on point.” He sticks his hand below his silkies waistband, grabs his cock, and tucks it beneath the elastic, the head poking past it. “But goddamn, I’d run through that so hard.” He cradles his balls through his silkies and addresses Joel. “I’ve been laying-in for your daughter, Tex. You can give me your
blessing or tell me to go to Hell. Or both.”

The muscles at the base of Joel’s throat twitch. His whole body gathers-up for action. Chapman’s taunting him and it’s clear he enjoys riling him up. Part of me likes this, too. No one ever talks to Joel like this. He pushes Joel even harder, a big smirk on his face. “What do you say to letting me borrow your daughter and the keys to your ride tonight, Tex?”

Joel springs from the bank and grabs Chapman from behind in a rear overarm hold. Spray splashes riotously. He pins Chapman’s arms to his ribs and slides his elbow into a choke hold. Chapman drives his arm deep into Joel’s ribs, bucking violently. He thrashes free and boosts onto the shore. Joel follows, chasing him around the oxbow. Chapman can outrun him, no contest, but where’s he going to go? Run in circles till he tires Joel out? Neither of them can go far in bare feet. I’ve seen Joel play football. He’s not as quick on his feet as Tommy or the younger men like Chapman but he dominates through brute force, pushing the shorter lighter guys out of his path. No way Chapman can win against him.

I follow the Deltas toward the fracas, gesticulating and shouting rough commands. Chapman attempts to feint and pivot but he falters and stumbles to a halt. They square toward each other with clenched fists and snarled noses. Joel throws a straight punch, striking Chapman’s nose hard and fast. Head snapping backward, Chapman stumbles to one knee, his nose ribboning thick blood. Anyone could tell it’s going to be a quick fight. Chapman talks big but that’s about all there is to him. He didn’t even have enough sense to block Joel’s blow.

Tommy tries to grab Joel’s shoulder to pull him back. Joel snarls and hurls him backward. Chapman uses the diversion to his advantage, pulling himself to his feet with a roar and uppercutting toward Joel’s jaw. Joel blocks it with his forearm, catches Chapman’s wrist, and drives his elbow into his armpit, dropping him to the ground. Joel pins him down on his stomach and hammerlocks one of his arms behind his back. “I ain’t even half-done, boy,” he says, his voice virile and hushed in rage. “How much more have you got in you?”

Chapman flails in agony. “Get the fuck offa me!” he yells, his voice tight and panicked. “Get him off!”

Joel lets him go. Chapman bridges himself over the grass. He palpitates his bloodied nose and gashed cheek, and spits blood to the ground. Joel knifes a hand toward him in truce, his jagged knuckles dripping blood. “Are we square?” he asks him. “We’re either friend or foe. If I ain’t a friend, I’m an enemy.”

“Fuck off, faggot!” Chapman yells. He knocks away Joel’s hand and rises to his feet, swaying dizzyingly. He addresses Tommy with blazed eyes. “What the fuck’s wrong with your brother, Miller?”

“I ain’t his keeper,” Tommy says.

Chapman addresses Joel. “I didn’t say nothing.”

“Have some goddamn decency,” Joel says.


Coffey cuffs Chapman’s shoulder and says, “Lemme offer you a little advice, son. That forbidden fruit ain’t worth picking.”

“I’ll pick whatever goddamn fruit I want, old man!” Chapman yells and rips his hand away. “I ain’t
taking advice from nobody!

“You can pick all the fruit you want from here to the sun,” Coffey says. “Even that ripe cherry.” He glances at me. He means me. I’m the ripe cherry. “You just can’t eat it.”

“I’mma grub what I want, when I want,” Chapman says, “with none of you fags interfering.”

“I’mma tell you straight-up,” Tommy says to him, his voice truculent. “There’s nothing doing there, you understand? You ain’t gotta lick of sense if you don’t shut your goddamn mouth. Now I’ve said all I’m gonna say.”

“Don’t worry, Miller,” Chapman says with a mocking smile. “I ain’t as interested in her as you are.”

“You ain’t getting a rise outta me, Chapman,” Tommy says.

“And you ain’t running me off,” Chapman says.

Joel addresses Chapman. “I reckon I’m moving too fast for you to follow so I’mma tell you straight-up. So there won’t be any more misunderstandings, you keep her name outta your filthy mouth. I reckon that’s all.”

“I ain’t afraid of you, Tex,” Chapman says.

“Give it some time,” Coffey laughs. His joke breaks the tension. The Deltas laugh and start drifting away to break camp.

A terrible thought comes to me. I wish Joel were gone from this earth so he’d leave me alone. It’s the first time I’ve ever felt this and I don’t like thinking this but I feel it intensely. All that time drifting, I got so used to him being around. I know he’s not a possession but he felt no different to me than my pack. Something useful and essential I called-upon every single day, something I couldn’t live without.

I realize out of nowhere he’ll never let me be with anyone else. It’s like I belong to him, and him alone. Chapman for example. I don’t care about Chapman. He’s harmless. He talks big but he’s nobody. So what’s going to happen when I fall in love with a real rival, someone vital? Then what? Will Joel always be around like a chaperone? The three of us? Or maybe I’ll have to start lying to him about those things so he won’t interfere.

There are no good answers here. I want to be able to love Joel and love someone else at the same time but in a different way. I fear it’s never going to be possible. You see the problem? Joel’s affection for me is like a dad for his daughter but when he acts like this, it makes me feel like I’m his wife or his girlfriend. It’s not right. I hate myself for having these thoughts. I hate myself for resenting him. I hate resenting his protection. I don’t really resent him. I suppose I’m just worried.

He treats Chapman as if he’s a rival for my affection, attention, and love. It doesn’t feel right. It’s like Joel always has to make people look over their shoulder. I know he could’ve killed Chapman with his bare hands. We all know this. I also know he doesn’t care one way or another if it’d happened. But I care. Not because I like Chapman but because it’s what Joel wants and I hate what he wants. I feel like Joel only got into the fight for himself and it had nothing to do with me. He only thinks about himself. He felt threatened and he had to do something dramatic about it. The same arrogance that makes Tommy so magnetic makes Joel so dangerous. I worry one day it’ll make him do something truly reckless.
“Osage, brothers,” Tommy says. We stand at the edge of a placid grove of sturdy Osage trees boxed-in by thick timber ridgelines rising to low granite hills.

After the oxbow, we’d stopped at the salt lick up near the springs. We poured water on it and collected the brine. When we get back to Jackson, we’ll let it evaporate in the sun.

“Day’s shortening by the sun,” Chapman says, his face drawn in pain. Swollen, bloodied, and his eyes are purple. He’s a sight. Joel clearly broke his nose.

“Those are some pretty knees you’ve got under that skirt,” Coffey says.

“And you sound like a fag,” Chapman says to him.

“That’s about the millionth time you’ve said fag today. Something you wanna talk about, son? We won’t judge you.”

“Fuck off, Coffey,” Chapman says, his voice bitter.

“Lead on,” Joel says to Tommy like he’s made the decision for all of us. Me? I don’t care. I don’t mind another mission before we return, although the mood’s changed since the fight. The men are silent and their faces are blank.

Patton lashes the horse to a cluster of trees next to a large boulder. Deltas unclip M4s, lift their rigs from their sweat-soaked t-shirts, and blouse their 5.11s to their knees. They hoist rusty tools over their backs and fan the grove.

Axes chop into heartwood. Branches swish and leaves rustle. Bark peels in sharp cracks, the air fragrant with bitter resin. Leathery oranges thump to the ground. I gather the fruit in a large canvas bag for the Ark’s horses. We’ll use the close-grain wood for tool handles, clubs, fence posts, and treenails, and its heartwood for bows. I think of Gold’s large ledger where he records all of the settlement’s births and deaths, which he keeps locked in a fireproof safe. He writes with a goose quill, and his ink’s made from the roots and bark of these trees.

Deltas lug the branches into a large pile to be trimmed for transport. That’s my job. I unsheathe my machete, and strike through the boughs and branches. Between trimmings, I look up and scan the landscape. At the northeast ridgeline, my eye’s drawn to swift shadows shooting past a narrow clearing. Deer? No. Any animal would be long gone by now. My scalp rises in alarm. The movement’s short and irregular. The forms are human. Cresskills? Military? Rebels? Outlaws? It doesn’t matter. It’s bad news. “I see movement!” I yell. Deltas rest their tools and swivel their heads. “In the ridge! Two o’clock!”


Incoming! I dive prone between the felled branches and cling to the earth. Crows squawk riotously and darken the sky in swirls, their velvety wings beating-off in rapid strokes. Deltas drop from the trees, seek cover, and unsheathe their handguns. It’s a reflexive gesture. Handguns are useless at
this range. We’ve been caught unawares. Load out lays inaccessible in the kill zone. We’re totally fucked.

“F*ck!” Maxwell yells. “F*ck!”

“You hit?” Patton yells.

“My fucking arm! What the f*ck?”

I peer above cover. Maxwell’s slumped against a trunk. He clutches his bloodied bicep, his face creased hopeless. He’s been hit. He unfastens his canvas belt and tourniquets his arm with his fixed blade, slipping it between the belt and his bicep. His eyes squeeze shut and his legs writhe pain as he twists and tucks the blade handle below the strap.

Patton fires his .357 revolver blindly into the ridgeline. His eyes are brisk and his face is tense. “Who’s gotta fix on them?”

“In the trees!” Coffey yells. “Two o’clock! Light ‘em up!”

Return fire slams the dirt at his feet, puffing-up dust. He curses broadly.

Joel shouts my name. “Are you hit?” he asks.

“No!” I yell. “Are you?”

“Stay down!” he yells. Airbursts splinter the trees all around me. “Tommy! What do you see?”

“Eight to ten!” Tommy yells. “Layered ambush. Gonna draw their fire. Get to those goddamn weapons, brothers!” He rushes from his cover and crosses into the timber. Joel follows a couple paces behind.

Wherever he goes, I go. I pull from cover and rush toward the woods. I high-crawl downfield and throw myself behind the first suitable cover I can find—the gnarled tangled roots of an ancient oak. Bad cover but it’ll have to do. I can’t push any further because twenty yards downfield is Joel and Tommy. They lay prone-out at opposite ends of a large boulder, their boot soles pointed toward me. They’ve found very good cover while they wait for the fire team. They have no idea I followed them, no idea I’m behind them. Joel would kill me if he knew.

I unsheathe my pistol from my ankle holster and aim it downfield toward the enemy fire. It’s useless at this range—I know this—but the weight of it in my hand feels reassuring. I sweep the muzzle past Tommy and Joel’s heads, and something comes over me. I think about killing Tommy. I don’t know why this comes to me but I feel it intensely. I’ve never felt anything like this before in my life. Killing a man in cold blood for no good reason at all. It’s a strange thing to feel. It’s not that I hate him and want him dead. I suppose it’s because his rejection hurts and I want to hurt him back.

The more I think about it, the more I realize I want to see him injured, helpless, and frightened. I want to injure his pride. Take him down a peg. I want to show him I’m not someone to be played with and tossed aside. Maybe I could just graze him. No. No, that won’t do. My aim isn’t good enough, even from such a close distance. I’d have to aim at something large, like his torso. It’d be a lethal shot, for sure. I picture him laid out, flat and dying, begging for my forgiveness. My chest tightens and adrenaline lightens my limbs. I zero my sights on the center of his back. I suppose I really don’t want to kill him but I want to know I could kill him if I wanted to. I could do it. I really could.
If I killed him, then what happens? I suppose they’ll say he died a hero, protecting his Delta brothers. No one would mourn him if he died a hero. They’ll celebrate his life. I suppose Joel would become next-in-line to run Jackson. Would he even want to? Would he have to go live with Maria? Oh. I suppose he would, which means he’d have to move to the Vale and live with Eve, too. I don’t like this idea. I don’t like anything about this at all. What a strange thing to think about at a time like this. I don’t know what’s come over me. I suppose it’s the fear and adrenaline mixed into one—

Thwack! A sleek object whizzes overhead and embeds in the tree trunk a couple inches above my head. Splinters ricochet all around me. I look up at it. It takes a second for me to understand what it is—a quivering fixed blade sunk into the trunk thrown from behind. This makes no sense. There are only Deltas behind me. Friendly fire. My blood ices. Have we been ambushed? Are we surrounded? I don’t want to look but I have to. I turn to look and I gasp. It’s Chapman, stalking toward me with a pistol teacupped in his hands, aimed right at me.

It was his knife. I’m sure of this. I don’t know if it was meant to hit me and missed its mark or if it was thrown in warning. Either way, he’s not fucking around. He’s got nothing to lose. Joel and I took away his pride. In front of all the men. I suppose he wants to hurt me for the same reason I want to hurt Tommy. To teach me a lesson.

I thumb the safety and track him down the muzzle of my pistol as he stalks toward me. Please don’t make me use this on you, I yell at him silently. Please don’t make me shoot you, Chapman.

“Put your gun away!” he yells at me as he comes into earshot. “I ain’t afraid of it! Put it away!” He squares in front of me. “Fixing on killing someone, Ellie?” He squints downfield. I can see his eyes taking everything in, figuring-out my sightlines and where I was aiming my gun. His eyes flash amazement. Bingo. He’s figured it out and he intends to tattle. “Tommy!” he yells. Tommy makes no answer I can hear. I picture him turning around to acknowledge Chapman, who continues, “This little cunt’s fixing to pop you off—"

Crack! A long-range spent cartridge whines and bursts in front of Chapman’s face. Shredded flesh, teeth, and bone rocket the air. He whirls sharply and collapses onto his back in a limp heap. What did I see? What just happened? I feel my eyes widening in disbelief. Is he dead? After a long silent moment, he stirs and clutches where his throat once was. Everything below his nose is disintegrated into pulpy bloody red gore. Eyes wide and distant in terror, he grabs my ankle and jerks my foot. Thick dark blood froths and sprays from the carnage below his eyes. Strangled gurgles bubble his throat. He dies reluctantly, his eyes fixed and slowly dimming. His icy blood-slicked hand slips from my ankle.

Crack! Crack! Enemy bullets upturn the air and spatter the brushwood all around me. I hear swift determined footfalls coming from downfield. In my head, I picture Tommy or Joel coming to get me. Why would they come to get me?

Crack! I hear the fierce wail of a wounded man coming from where I heard the footfalls. My whole body freezes, seized in horror and dread. I’ll never forget this sound. The flat sharp shot and the prolonged wail. My whole face goes pale and breaks-out in a cold sweat. I don’t want to look but I have to. God in Heaven—it’s Joel. He lays sprawled on his back, grimed in earth and blood. He claws at the dirt and clutches at the undergrowth unable to right himself. His eyes are wild.

Tommy dashes from cover and hauls him back by his chest rig till he’s safe behind the boulder. Enemy rounds crack and propel flint into the air, carving the trunks at my sides. The distance between my cover and theirs crosses the killing zone but I have no other thought than getting to Joel. I make a blind dash for him and sink to my knees at his side.
"How’re you doing, Joel?" I yell, using every ounce of willpower to keep my voice even and hold myself together.

"I got hit," he says, his eyes locked on mine, tracking me intently. His whole body trembles.

"I know!" I start to cut away his rigging with my switchblade. My hands are covered in his blood. I don’t like this. I don’t like seeing this. Something like this should never happen. None of this makes sense. This can’t be happening. Just a little while ago he was running around the oxbow and now look at him. Sprawled on his back, bleeding-out from a wound. This can’t be happening. Not Joel. Not him.

Tommy monitors Joel’s pulse, his face creased hopeless. I slash through his jeans, slippery and red. Blood lisps in listless spurts from his hip, flecked in dirt and debris. It snakes his thigh and pools black over the earth. I press down on the artery. It’s bad. A sickening wave of nausea descends. I don’t know if he’s going to make it. Tommy rips his bandana from his pocket and plugs the ruptured artery with it. Joel starts struggling to pull himself upright with his weight on his elbow. He sweeps-up a trembling arm and reaches for Tommy.

"Stop it, Joel!" I yell and pin down his arm.

"It’s bad," he says. His eyes flash a mix of horror, fear, and confusion.

"You’re barely hit!" I yell. "It’s just a scratch!"

He’s alive but for how long? My heart beats in my throat, choking me out. Every moan and gasp from his gnarled mouth knifes my heart. I squeeze my eyes shut, wondering if this is just a nightmare. I’ll open my eyes, I tell myself, and it’ll all go away. I’ll find myself back in my bunk in Zeta with a bad flu, shivering and feverish. That’s all it is. That’s what it must be. A feverish nightmare. I’m going to open my eyes and hear Joel’s voice saying something like, ‘Ellie, wake up, you’re having a bad dream.’ I open my eyes and my heart knifes. It’s not a bad dream. Joel lays on the ground bleeding out like slaughtered livestock.

Shattering violent explosions erupt at my side. M4s cough, their muzzles flashing fire. Patton and Coffey have arrived with firepower. They crouch over their heels and trill 5.56s into the downfield thickets, pounding away at the invisible targets and stitching-up the forest in deafening bursts.

Joel’s eyes roll back. His lips retract, blotchy and white. I shout his name and pull up his eyelids with my thumbs until his eyes spin forward and his face fractures in pain. “You’ve gotta stay awake, Joel!” I yell. "I know you’re tired but you can’t sleep! You’ve gotta stay awake!” I wipe away thick streaks of saliva and blood coursing the corners of his mouth. His skin’s mottled blue and grey. “Keep pressure on it!” I yell at Tommy, meaning Joel’s wound.

“I am!” he yells. “It’s so open!”

"Just keep pressure!"

“Clear!” Patton yells.

A rude echo hushes the forest. Patton and Coffey lower the M4s from their shoulders. Bitter vapor hazes and drifts. Spent brass glitters the black earth.

“How are you doing, Joel?" I yell and squeeze his rust-red hands. His grip is cold and lifeless.

“Fine,” he says, his voice weak and distant.
“You’re gonna stay fine!” I yell.

Maxwell sprints over with a pole-less litter tucked under his arm. A thin stream of blood trickles his fingers and drips to the ground. His face is etched in fear and dread. He stares at Joel and gestures the sign of the cross. Why’d he do that? I wish he hadn’t done that. “Chapman’s dead,” he says, his face ashen. “Plenty dead.” He throws down the litter and unzips a medical kit. He sails a large hemostatic bandage into my lap and hands me a morphine auto-injector. I pray everything still works. It’d better. I rip away the cap, jab the pen into Joel’s thigh, and slap the bandage over his wound.

I think the morphine’s working because Joel starts struggling to lift himself from the ground again. It’s clear he’s trying to sit up but he can’t. He calls for his brother over fast shallow breath. “I’ve got something to say, Tommy. Hold me up, brother.”

“Take it easy, Joel,” Tommy says and leads him back to the ground, flat on his back.

Eyes set in vigorous concentration, Joel grabs Tommy’s chest kit with a quivering arm and pulls him close. “I’m wanting to talk, Tommy, and I ain’t got long. Take good care of her, Tommy. Keep her safe.”

“Don’t worry, brother,” Tommy says.

“I ain’t caring what’s happening to me, Tommy. I’m caring about her. She won’t get mistreated when I’m gone.”

“I give you my word,” Tommy says.

“Swear it.”

“I ain’t lying to you, Joel.”

I choke back a sob, crestfallen Joel could suffer so much trauma and only think of my safekeeping.

“Tommy—”

“No more talking, Joel!” I yell, interrupting him, my voice tight with tears.

“We’ve gotta move,” Tommy says. He rips Patton’s M4 from his hands by the carry handle and pushes it into my hands. “Cover us.”

Faces hurried and eyes grave, the men stretch up Joel onto the litter and jog toward the grove, their free hands raised against the low whipping branches. I follow them on overwatch and track the empty landscape down the M4 handrail. My whole body trembles with visceral rage and retribution for the unseen enemy.

The cart’s emptied to make room for Joel and he’s loaded onto it. I jump in and kneel at his side. I wipe the blobby sweat from his forehead and the fresh blood from the corners of his mouth, threaded down his neck. I take his limp cold blood-stained hand into mine and press it to my cheek.

“Go!” I yell at the men, my ears beaten deaf. “Go! Go! Go! Let’s move!”

“Max’s ambulatory!” Tommy yells. “Patton’s overwatch!”

“I’m not leaving him!” I yell, my voice splintered in rage.

Tommy boosts into the cart, grabs me around the waist, and shoves me to the ground. The wind’s
knocked out of me as I land. I lay on the ground floundering and gasping for air. Tommy rips my
pistol from appendix carry and slams it aside my head with a growl of revulsion. He knows it’s my
gun. He knows I stole it back from the armory. He probably believes what Chapman tried to tell
back to Jackson. Joel staying alive.

“Pile out, brothers!” Tommy yells at the men. “Let’s step!”

Patton and Maxwell swing the men’s combat loads into the cart and perch the rails at Joel’s sides,
their M4s swung to combat-ready. Tommy grabs the horse’s mane and swings over the saddle pad.
He smacks its flank with the flat of his hand and shouts a broad command. The horse snorts, leaps,
and plunges forward, his hooves clattering as the cart banks onto the asphalt.

At the first gasp of breath, I scramble to my feet and chase the cart down the crumbled asphalt until
Coffey tackles me to the ground.
Chapter Twenty-Two

Time no longer holds any meaning. I don’t remember how long the firefight lasted, how long we were in the grove before the shots erupted, how long we were in the oxbow, or how long it took before Coffey and I crossed Jackson’s gates, parched in dust and stained in Joel’s blood.

Maria and I stand across from the locked infirmary doors. I feel like I’ve been waiting in this hallway forever. Tommy can’t stand still. He paces around, his t-shirt stained dark in his brother’s blood, and his eyes remote and shifty under his baseball cap.

“Don’t worry,” Maria says and grabs my trembling hand. “They’ll patch him up.”

I don’t want her pity or comfort. She’s got Tommy. He’s alive and he’s going to stay alive. She has no idea what the loss of Joel would mean to me. I wrench my hand from her grip and shove it into my pocket where I fondle a silver pendant engraved with a haggard saint Coffey ripped from a chain around his neck and gave to me on the return hike. I’m not religious or superstitious but I’m scared Joel’s not going to make it. Though I suppose if he were dead, I would’ve felt it in my gut. I know I would’ve felt it and I feel nothing. I’m just worried his luck’s finally run out.

Tommy pounds the infirmary door with the butt of his pistol. The hall reverberates its rude metallic echo. “What’s doing, Doc?” he yells and curses under his breath.

After a minute, the handle twitches and the door swings wide open. I rush past Tommy, and slam into Gold and his assistant surgeon, Culpepper.

“I gave him the Presidential Suite,” Gold says and gestures toward a large private cell against the back wall. It’s separated from the main room by a long tall row of stainless-steel lockers.

I sprint the aisle and cross into the cell. Joel. It’s Joel. He’s here and he’s alive. He lays unconscious in a bunk, tucked tightly below a grey wool blanket. One arm’s draped outside his blanket with an IV connected to the back of his pale hand. I’ve never seen his hands so listless and still. Waxy and white with blue veins showing through the black hair. I walk to his bedside, my eyes never leaving his face. He’s very pale beneath his tan. His body’s long and flat under the blanket. There are no creases or bagginess to the sheets. He’s out cold. I don’t like seeing him like this. It’s not how Joel should look. A hopeless position. Flat on his back with his body shattered.

Tommy, Maria, Culpepper, and Gold circle the bed. It’s clear Joel’s not dying. All of us have seen enough men dying to know he’s not dying. All of us have seen enough men dying to know he’s not dying. All of us have seen enough men dying to know he’s not dying. All of us have seen enough men dying to know he’s not dying. All of us have seen enough men dying to know he’s not dying. All of us have seen enough men dying to know he’s not dying. All of us have seen enough men dying to know he’s not dying. I exhale one long breath. It feels like the first breath I’ve taken all day. It feels like the first breath I’ve taken all day. It feels like the first breath I’ve taken all day. It feels like the first breath I’ve taken all day. It feels like the first breath I’ve taken all day. I feel like I’ve been holding my breath the whole time since we got here, waiting for something bad to happen, waiting for something to come and destroy the peace we found here. I figured it couldn’t last and it hasn’t. Trouble’s come for us but now it’s over.

Gold stands behind me and cuffs my neck. “It was bad,” he says, “but it looked worse than it was. No visceral injuries. It could’ve really chewed him up, couldn’t have missed him any closer. One bullet, no loose fragments. It ricocheted a couple sections of his small bowel and embedded in his
hip. I extracted it and repaired a transected bowel.”

“Supposing he’ll be alright?” Tommy asks.

“He’s got a fractured pelvis,” Gold says. “No riding anything but a chair for two months.” He’s making a joke. No one laughs but the mood in the room lightens. It’s appreciated.

“He’s gotta cast?” Tommy asks.

“You don’t set it. It heals on its own.”

“Thanks, Doc.”

“Thank me in a few weeks.”

“Those goddamn Cresskills! We’re gonna clean them out. Stomp them out like a den of rattlers!”

Joel’s eyes lazily slit open, unfocused and far-off, bruised and deeply sunken. After a moment, he slips unconscious.

“Hey, brother,” Tommy says. “How the hell you ain't dead? We done gave you up for killed.”

“Looks like you and Eve’ll have your hands full,” Maria says to Gold.

“He needs his rest,” Gold says. He excuses himself with Culpepper to prepare for Maxwell’s surgery.

I drag a steel chair to Joel’s bedside. I perch the seat and track his chest as he draws shallow breath, synchronizing my own to his.

A stern mezzo voice calls my name—Eve’s voice. I open my eyes and she’s standing in front of me. “You can’t sleep here,” she says.

“Huh?” I ask, my voice thick with sleep.

“Beds are for patients only.”

I yawn, slide from the foot of Joel’s infirmary bunk, and step into my sneakers. My ears still ring from the firefight. An insidious headache pounds my head. Beyond Joel’s cell, the infirmary’s dark under curfew tranquility. No Gold. It must be the middle of the night. “Where’s Gold?” I ask.

“Sleeping,” she says. “It’s toward four. Not that it’d make any difference to you.” She circles Joel’s bunk and dramatically brushes-away powdered blood and dirt from where I’d slept at his feet.

Joel’s eyes crack halfway open, distant and unfocused. He gazes languidly around the room and shuts them. “Ellie,” he says through sluggish lips. “Howdy.”

My heart throbs relief. “Hey,” I say, my voice high and tight. “Joel.”

“Alright?” he asks.
“Better than you,” I joke. He likes this joke. The corners of his mouth pull into the faintest smile. He’s pleased to see me, pleased I’m here. This is a fact. I’ll bet I’m the first person he’s spoken to since he was knocked out.

Eve comes to his side, lays her hand across his forehead, and pulls a thermometer from her pocket. “Pardon me, honey,” she says to him, her voice sweetly-drawled. She’s using that fake baby voice she uses with the Deltas. “Vitals. Open up.” She slides the thermometer into his mouth and fastens a blood pressure cuff to his arm. “How’s your pain?”

“Needs something,” he says.

She syringes his IV line with ocher fluid. “That’ll do,” she says. His brow unfurrows and his lips part soundlessly as he slips unconscious. She pulls my pack from the floor and hands it to me. Her manner’s aggressive and efficient. “Time to hit the breeze.”

“Gold said I could stay,” I say.

“Well, he didn’t say anything to me. I’ll have to wake him for clearance.”

After patching up Maxwell, Gold cleaned and dressed my wounds with turpentine, and massaged arnica salve into my scratched-up arms. As a treat, he slipped me a handkerchief full of his soap shavings. He’s got a special arrangement with the Tau women. They make him a special reserve of soap scented with cedar oil. After that, he led me back to Joel’s bed where he showed me how to massage his legs to ward-off pulmonary embolisms, which I did till I fell asleep.

“Gold said I needed to massage his legs,” I say.

“He’ll be needing a lot of care,” she says. “The kind only a woman can give him.”

I groan disgust under my breath and think about this for a moment. If she’s telling the truth about having to wake Gold for clearance, there’s no doubt he’s exhausted after back-to-back emergency surgeries. I’d hate to wake him. If she’s bluffing, I could swallow her bluff and take a little break to bathe. My whole body’s crusted in dried sweat, blood, grease, and vomit. I decide to bathe. I’ll be back in less than an hour. A half hour, even. What could happen in a half hour? I jostle my pack over my shoulder and cut toward the aisle.

“Hold on just a minute,” she says. “I’m wanting a word with you.”

“I can’t talk. I’m in a hurry.”

“I don’t need you to talk. I need you to listen. Reckon you can manage that?”

“What do you want?” I ask, my tone clipped and impatient. What could she possibly want to talk about right now?

“I wanna talk about that business last Sunday,” she says.

“What business?”

“That business with the chairs.”

After a moment, I realize what she’s talking about—her stupid chair game. My face darkens with anger. Get a load of this bitch, is what I’m thinking. “That’s what’s bothering you?”

“That’s what I wanna talk about.”
“Well, figure it out yourself.” I head for the door.

She follows me. “Don’t you walk away from me!”

I stop. I don’t stop to please her. I stop because she’s so fucking loud, I worry she’ll wake-up Joel and Gold with all her shouting. “What the fuck’s your problem?” I whisper, trying to steer her voice down.

“That game you played on Sunday?” she asks. “Come into my house and tell me how to run things?” Her eyes flash belligerence and her chest swells defiantly. “And I don’t like that goddamn sneer on your face every time I speak to you.”

“What sneer?” I ask, knowing fully-well the sneer she’s talking about. I know I’m doing it and I’m happy she’s noticed. I’m happy it pisses her off.

“That damned sneaky grin. I’m entitled to respect and I’mma have it.”

“You’ll earn my respect when you deserve it.”

She doesn’t like this. Her eyes ice over. “Now listen here. I ain’t the type to let anybody get the best of me, so lemme make this clear. I’mma get even with you when you least expect it.”

“For what?”

“For showing me up in front of my kin, in front of all them folks.”

“Is that a threat?”

“You’re goddamn right it’s a threat and you’d best be hearing me. Remember what I said. You’ll be getting what I owe you.”

I scoff. “It’s gonna take a lot more than your threats to scare me. Me and him, drifting?” I say, meaning Joel. “I was never scared—not once. You think you can hurt me? Go ahead. I’m not losing sleep over it.”
Chapter Twenty-Three

The white-tiled floors of the women’s bathroom glow silver with wide strips of milky moonlight. You don’t need a lantern on a night like tonight.

I fill an aluminum bucket with rainwater runoff from a large steel drum and lug it to a shower stall along the back wall. I strip naked, submerge Gold’s soap-filled handkerchief into the bucket, and rub it all over my body, the glycerin biting my wounds. I’m already stiff and achy. Tomorrow I’m gonna feel like I was hit by a boulder. I bury my nose to my skin and inhale deep. I smell like Gold. Woodsy aromatic cedar. I like the smell of him on my skin. I suppose a girl should want to smell like sweet white flowers or roses or pink blossoms. Not me. So what. I dunk my soiled clothes into the bucket. While they soak, I untangle dead leaves and splinters from my wet hair. I finger-scrub my teeth with charcoal powder from an old plastic prescription bottle.

Without warning, I sense someone coming behind me and a rough hand covers my mouth. “Not a word,” a voice says—Tommy’s voice. God! Tommy! He stamps a cold steel muzzle above my ear. I exhale brightly into his hand, heaving panicked breath. His stiff muscles gather themselves-up. His whole body vibrates tension. He’s in a killing mood. “When I move my hand,” he says, “don’t you breathe, child. Are we clear?” He grinds the muzzle for emphasis.

I grunt against his fingers and nod my head, yes.

“Scream and I’ll choke the life outta you.” He takes away his hand. “Chapman wasn’t lying, was he?” He presses his lips against my ear like he’s going to tell me a secret. “Be mighty careful of what you say. I ain’t giving you a chance to reconsider. Was Chapman lying?”

“No,” I whisper, my tone urgent.

“Wasn’t an accident,” he says.

“No.”

“You were gunning for me.”

“Yes.”

He grits his teeth and hisses revulsion. “The next time you crowd me, I’llma throw my gun on you and I won’t stop till I get you.” He pulls me closer and drags me down as he lowers to his knees. “I’llma get you for that someday. When I get you where I want you, I’llma get you for that.” He wrestles me across his thighs like he’s going to spank me, which I suppose he is, because he says, “Now I’m gonna beat you. Beat you till the fight’s all outta you.”

I bleat panic. No, Tommy, I beg him silently. Not that! Not now! I kick-out fiercely and claw the cold wet tiles, trying to get away. “Don’t even try it,” he says, his voice derisive. He slips his arm around my waist, slippery in soapy run-off, and vices me against his abdomen. “Don’t make me say it again,” he says, his voice gruff with virile menace. “You take what’s coming to you.”

I choke back a sob. I deserve this, I tell myself. I brought this upon myself. I thought about killing him and he came for me. I know what kind of man he is by now. It’s my fault this is happening.
This is what happens to wicked girls like me. I wished death on everyone. Joel. Tommy. Chapman. This is what I get for thinking such horrible terrible things. I stop struggling when I realize he won’t be talked out of it. I know this. I lay across his lap with my hands flat against the tiles, every muscle straining in apprehension.

“You take your beating in silence,” he says. He pries open my mouth and pokes his balled-up bandana between my lips. He ties it behind my head. I start to pant, whimpering for leniency. He grunts, non-committal and dismissive. He draws his belt through his waistband with an ominous whisk, doubles it into a loop, and steadies me over his thighs. “When I’m through with you, you’re gonna wish you’d never been born. I’mma knock some of that damned pride outta you.”

The air whisks maliciously. Crack! I flinch and jolt forward. The bright fresh pain stings the center of my bottom and shoots through my whole body. I yelp into the bandana, clenching and unclenching my ass cheeks. Crack! A fresh lash bites the tops of my thighs. I quiver and thrash over his lap. Crack! The next one comes down harder and faster along the crest of my ass cheeks. I shriek and writhe, and kick-out my legs. Crack! The belt cuts ruthlessly across the sensitive flesh of my inner thighs. Choked in urgent panic, I buck my hips and writhe against him, reaching across my bottom to massage the stinging burning fire.

He doesn’t like this. He hammerlocks my arm to the small of my back. “Move your hand again and that’s another lashing. Take them well and there won’t be need for no more.”

I go very quiet and still. Not at the thought of extra lashes. I go quiet because his manner’s shifted. His seething rage has burned-down to something else. A cold merciless fury. Down comes his belt, hard and measured, heavy and decisive. Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack! I start to lose count. I howl and wail, muted into the bandana, my bottom rising and falling with each fresh lash. My whole body trembles, and my eyes go wide and bright in pain.

When it’s over, he tosses the belt onto my back. He’s out of breath like he’s just run a marathon. “Now you understand, yeah?” he says. “Don’t rile me up. I ain’t a man to be trifled with.”

I choke on a sob and start to weep. I lay over his lap and weep. I don’t cry because I’m in pain from his lashes. My pain isn’t physical. I cry over the fear and anguish I felt as Joel laid helpless and wounded in the dirt. The fear and frustration I felt fighting an invisible enemy. The shame of wanting to kill Tommy in cold blood. The regret of wishing Joel away, and the great relief he survived another trauma and lived another day.

Tommy trembles beneath me. A chilling moan comes from deep in his throat. I don’t know what this sound is until I feel his shoulders heave and he starts to cry. He holds onto me tight and he weeps. He holds me so tight I can’t get away even if I wanted to. He doesn’t make the desperate choked-out sobs of a mourning man. It’s the tender weeping of a broken terrified man, working out his grief and his fear and his relief, all mixed into one.

He’s no longer a man but a child. I know this because I feel the same way. Reduced to a helpless child. His assault rifles, fearlessness, and bravery could wipe-out an entire army, but today in the grove, the enemy was invisible. All the guns in the world couldn’t put a clear face on the enemy. He watched his own brother get popped off and there wasn’t a damn thing he could do about it. It’s reduced him to a blubbering child. Helpless and soft. I feel his confusion and hopelessness acutely. He’s beaten. I’m beaten. He weeps and I weep with him.

I don’t like when adults cry. This isn’t something I like to see. But having Tommy weep with me makes me feel less alone and frightened.
“Man and horse were outlined against the deep blue sky. The tall rider had broad shoulders and a
slender waist. He wore heeled boots to keep his feet from slipping through the stirrups and a big
felt hat to keep out the sun—”

Joel interrupts me by flagging a weak hand above his long flat body laid in his infirmary bunk. I
look at him over the top of the book I’m reading to him. His eyes are red and dry from the
anesthesia aftermath.

“Enough?” I ask.

“Enough,” he says.

Gold loaned me the book from his small collection. He’s got a couple Old West pulp novels for the
Deltas in convalescence. I like these Westerns. Tales of cattlemen, ranch bosses, and square-jawed
cowboys dispensing justice to outlaws with a flash of ivory-handled revolvers before riding-off
into the sunset.

I slide the book onto his bedside table laid with his load-out, an enamelware mug of water, an old
spirometer, and an uneaten bowl of broth. Damp linens dabbed with an aromatic mix of camphor
and cedar oils drape the bed frame to keep away the mosquitoes. Beyond the windows, the grey
sky slowly turns lilac of dawn’s early light.

“I hate needles,” I say and glance at his IV. “Does it hurt?”

“I’ve had worse,” he says. “Just a couple scratches.”

“Time heals all wounds.”

“Nah. It just kills off the memories.”

“You look better. You looked like shit.”

“Felt like it, like someone swung a sledgehammer into my hips. Like Boulder.”

I’ll never forget Boulder. I know he won’t, either. He can’t even if he wanted to because he’s got a
big ugly scar on his abdomen from it. I was the one who stitched it up. I was nervous but it felt like
stitching-up a big piece of leather. He was impaled on rebar during an ambush, mid-firefight. I got
him to his feet and towed him to a safe house on the back of a horse. He started running a fever and
I thought he’d die but I bartered a slaughtered buck for antibiotics from some outlanders who
turned-out to be savages. We barely survived but we’re still here.

“I knew something wasn’t right,” he says. “I heard that voice, deep in my gut.”

“What’d it say?” I ask.

“It said what it always says. ‘It’s coming off.’”

“There were too many of them.”

“You should’ve stayed back like I told you.”

“Wherever you go, I go.”
“You ain’t good for nothing if you’re shot dead.”

Hands trembling, he reaches for his mug on the bedside table. His eyes are lit with quiet determination. It takes a great effort to reach this mug. I don’t dare help him. He hates feeling helpless or feeling like a burden. He despises inactivity and the uselessness of his muscles. He hates proprietorship and doesn’t tolerate words of pity, sympathy, or charity. He gets the mug to his mouth, takes a sip, and rests it over his chest. He speaks. “The summer after my wife left us was the longest dry spell in over a hundred years.”

This is something, I tell myself. Joel never talks about his ex-wife and rarely talks about his past, especially unsolicited. I don’t even know her name. I never asked because he’d never tell me anyway. He continues, “Texas hadn’t seen a drought like that in over a century. There was dust everywhere—food, hair, beds—filled your eyes, mouth, ears, and nose till everything tasted like it. You felt the grit under your clothes every time you moved. I swept it out daily, in heaps. The sheets had to be changed daily ‘cause of it. By and by, the forests turned brown. Fires killed off the flowers and bushes. Shrubs shriveled up in the dry wind, everything scorched dead. Not a single blade of grass.

“Wells ran dry and sandstorms turned day to night. The whole land shimmered like quicksilver, like a big clay pan of baked mud, hard as concrete. You couldn’t tell where rivers ran except for bridges over big old mud puddles. The sky was hot and cloudless, like someone had turned a big blue bowl over the world. Once a week, a small grey cloud would squat over the horizon and we’d get hopeful but it never meant a damn thing. Sometimes Mother Nature just ain’t on your side.

“One of Tommy’s friends owned a big ranch in a basin out yonder. He set-up camp for them smaller ranchers. We lit out every couple of days, me and Sarah, and hauled back jugs for sponge-downs. Our clothes stayed as dirty as they were, she never once complained. The land was impassive, heartless. Nature doesn’t care. But I tamed it, wrestled it back, made it work for us. I never knew the power of resilience till that summer. I had to stay strong. For Sarah.”

He takes another sip from his mug and continues. “Before this, when we drifted, every night at bed-down I had my habit.”

I know what he’s talking about. He’d always say, ‘Ellie, we made it through another day.’ He said this every single time we went to bed without fail. If he believed in superstitions, he’d call it a superstition but Joel doesn’t believe in anything he can’t see.

“Made it through another day,” he says. “I had little faith in it but I was afraid to neglect it. Every morning when I laced-up my boots, I’d think, ‘Might not make it to bed-down.’ I hated that. But it kept me going, kept us alive. Couldn’t have you go it alone, all by yourself.” He looks at me directly. “When I was pinned down in them woods, I thought I was done for. Knew by your voice, knew by your eyes, knew it was bad. But I was at peace with that. ‘Cause you’re safe here.”

My chest tightens. Why are you saying this, I ask him silently.

“You’re getting big, Ellie,” he says. “Growing up fast. I won’t always be here.” He glances out the window. “Mankind’s expendable. Life can be taken for no reason at all. For no gain, no sacrifice, no symbolism. Every day you survive brings you one day closer to death. Could be days, could be weeks, could be months. It’s just a matter of time. One moment you’re a proud strong man standing tall, and the next, you’re a limp stiff crumbled heap swallowed in the dust. Life’ll extinguish like a shooting star and cast you to the ground. One day you’ll wake in this world and I won’t. You’ve gotta start getting used to that.”

I don’t understand any of this. Why’s he telling me this? Why now? Where does he plan on going?
“You’ve gotta be prepared to make your own way in this world,” he says. “Sometimes it means watching your nearest and dearest go to Hell.”
You’d think being laid-up in the infirmary would be a pleasant enough experience for Joel. He’s got a big private suite that’s clean and peaceful, and Gold takes very good care of him. He’s got a break from guard duty and chores. It’s not like he’s paralyzed. He’s not an invalid, never to ride a horse again, stuck in a wheelchair for life. He has a clean bed to lay in every day. He gets bathed every day. I think of him like all those soldiers in the Old World who came home from world wars, injured and sick, with medals pinned to their chests, laying in convalescence, dreaming about their wars. Nothing the same, everything different, and their bodies useless and maimed.

He doesn’t see it like that. He’s slowly going crazy from inactivity. I know this because I check-in on him daily. Late afternoons in my free time before dinner. I never stay long. Not because I have other things to do but because he’s become very unpleasant since he got shot. His temper’s explosive. His manner’s acidic. One thing to understand about Joel is, don’t be fooled by his size. He’s big but it’s easy to hurt him.

I imagine he feels lost being out of the game. Sometimes I try to imagine him in retirement. Sitting with his feet up on the hearth, pottering around the garden, or horsing around with his grandkids. How ridiculous is that? It must feel oppressive to him. He probably feels like he’s going to be injured for the rest of his life.

He hates feeling helpless. He hates pity. I suppose he’s scared his legs will heal unevenly or he’ll never be able to do normal things like ride a horse. It must make him go crazy to even think about it, lying there in bed, crippled and useless. I worry about this, too, but I’d never tell him. I’m thankful enough he’s alive.

He keeps a pair of rudimentary wooden crutches by his bedside to help him get around. They’re heavy and made of oak, covered in leather where it goes in his armpit. The handles are worn from years of use by wounded men before him. It took him a long time to start using them. After surgery, he laid in his bunk for a week straight. One whole week. Unbathed, dejected, mopey, and short-tempered. Gold had to get Tommy to intervene. This actually happened. Gold told me this. Joel would wake up cursing like the devil every single morning. Cursing himself, his leg, and his life.

Tommy was the only one who could motivate him to bathe and shave himself. I don’t know how he did it but we’re all relieved he did. I’ve seen Joel covered in dirt from head to toe but this was different. This was self-neglect. It made me angry to see him like this.

If I’m in the hall and I hear the distinct tapping of his crutches, I have to turn around and leave. It’s not that I’m shallow or superficial. I wouldn’t be able to see him crippled like that, struggling to walk, swinging his injured leg forward like a maimed coyote that got caught in a trap. Our whole relationship was founded on skill, endurance, action, courage, and strength. It’d ruin everything. I’d have to leave if he wanted to use those crutches in front of me.

After today’s visit, I felt something new from him. Resentment. Maybe some hostility. He’s resentful of my visits. I felt this acutely. It’s been coming on for a while. I need to stop visiting him so often. It makes me feel like a loyal dog who licks his master’s face after he shot himself in the foot. He must feel this intensely because my visits are making things worse between us. The thing
is, I’m in the infirmary daily. I’ve been reading one of Gold’s books. I should explain about Gold’s books. There are strict rules for borrowing them. They have to be returned before the end of the day. This means I’m not allowed to keep them overnight. It’s not because he doesn’t trust me. He has to do this. It has to be done.

Father Crane has his old Bible and Gold has his books. Those aside, there are no books here. There are no books anywhere. They were expendable. They were hoarded after the Critical for rolling papers, toilet paper, and tinder. No one cared about words anymore. Words couldn’t keep you warm, feed your starving family, or kill your enemies. You can’t read someone to death.

Gold keeps his small collection locked in a cabinet. Books are precious, you know. Precious sacred artifacts. If you left them unsupervised, they’d be taken, like how someone would take an unattended gun or a leftover piece of food without even thinking about it. There’s no right or wrong about this. In fact, you’d be the idiot for leaving those precious things of value unattended. You have to protect the valuable things you hold dear. No one will do this for you.

So with one of Gold’s books tucked under my arm, I’m off to find a nice quiet place to read in my free time before dinner. If you walk to the back of the powerhouse and veer left, you find a nice grassy field bordered by low hills. It’s where the Deltas and the Tau men play their sports. I get there, and I find the field quiet and empty. No screaming Tau kids kicking around a stinky sheep bladder. No giggling Zetas hanging out on the low rolling grassy mounds, a popular spot where they gather to gossip and have their little secrets.

I find a nice sunny spot against one of the small grassy hills. I kick off my sneakers, and rub my sweaty feet over the warm fragrant grass and clover. I recline against the rise, tent my legs, and use the tops of my thighs for my book. I’m reading Virgil’s Aeneid. It’s an epic poem about a Trojan prince’s wanderings and his founding of Rome. Rome! Gold’s been to Rome. Before I started reading it, he told me to open the book to a random spot, put down my finger, read the passage, and it’d predict my future. Imagine that. Well, I did it. I’m not sharing what it said. I’m not being evasive. I’m just not superstitious.

Look at me, reading a book outside in the sun. No one back in Boston would believe me. Fresh air and bare feet. No military menace. I play with the grass. I pet it and tug at it idly. I never tire of feeling the warm clean grass beneath my skin. Joel was right. This place isn’t half bad. There wasn’t even a blade of grass in Boston. No books, either. Just outdated tasking manuals, twice as old as me. If they went missing under your care, you got double detention for a whole semester.

Sometimes this place feels like a miracle. I look around and think to myself, this place can’t be real. The mountains look so crisp, I swear they’re paper cut-outs. I’m thriving here. No one could argue with that. My hair’s lightened from the sun and wind. It’s grown long and thick. My body’s tanned and toned from all the chores. I was always pale in Boston, like everyone else. The streets were narrow and the buildings shut-out the sun. We were kept inside from morning to night. When the weather was nice, we got a half hour of exercise in a graveled fenced-off lot.

The sun casts the mountains golden with low burnished rays. I read until my eyes grow heavy with sleep. I raise my arms above my head and cradle it between them. I lid-down, soothed by the gentle warmth of the sun and lulled by the wind through the trees. Water cascades the bridge’s spillway bays. Powerhouse laundry flaps gently in the wind. It’s so peaceful here, I think to myself as I drift to sleep.

I rouse sometime later from male voices in the distance. Voices coming from the direction of the footpath at the far edge of the field, the one you take to the Vale. I open my eyes and peek at the sun. Judging by its angle and the cast of the shadows on the mountains, I’ve been asleep for maybe
an hour. I close my eyes and picture who’s coming. The distinct sound of men’s feet. More than two, less than five. The sure-footed footsteps of younger men. They’re either Delta boots or young Tau single fathers. Most likely it’s the guard duty crews heading back to the powerhouse guardroom at the end of patrols. The grass swishes as they approach, followed by a conspicuous hush of voices, which comes a bit too abrupt. A suppressed belt of laughter. Leave me alone, I think to myself. Leave me in peace. Ignore me. Pretend I’m not here. Can’t you see I’m napping?

The footsteps pass and I feel my book being yanked from my lap. I lid-up and spring to my feet. It’s Burke. He’s holding my book. It was him. He took it. He’s with two Deltas, Kingston and Hartley, both duty officers. They look just like him with the same muscular build, the same fair coloring, and the same high and tight haircuts with short tawny beards. They’re kitted-up in fighting load carrier vests and bail-out bags slung around their hips, which tells me they’ve just been relieved from guard shift. They’re returning to the powerhouse for dinner. They’ll shuck their combat loads and rack their guns in the guard room.


“After I see what it is,” he says.

“Give it back,” I say, gesturing with more emphasis. My neck flushes dark in anger and I feel the hair sticking-up at the back of my head.

“Showing a little breeding?” he asks with a cold mirthless smile.

“More than you. Give it back!”

He ignores me and continues to flip roughly through the pages. I try to grab it out of his hands. He catches me by my t-shirt collar and holds me back in one hand while he hoists the book above his head with the other. I swipe for it futilely. He’s too big and I’m too little. His arms are too long. I try to grab it with all my might. I think about kicking him in the balls. I really want to do this but I tell myself it shouldn’t come to this. Not yet.

“Hold that bitch back!” he yells at Kingston and Hartley.

I feel their hands on my arms and my waist, pulling me back.

“Let go!” I yell. “Let go of me!” I fight against them. They tighten their grip. After a futile struggle, I relent. They’re bigger and stronger than me. They outnumber me. I glare at Burke. “I’ll fucking kill you, asshole!” I yell at him. My voice comes out shrill. I wish I could growl like Joel. They’d never fuck with me if I could growl like Joel.

“Shut her up!” Burke yells at Kingston and Hartley.

Dirty rough hands cover my mouth, smelling like sweat and pungent dirt. I gag and stiffen, holding my breath against their rough smell and grunting against their filthy fingers. They’re both silent except for the whistling of their breath. They don’t need to threaten me. They know they’ve got me.

Burke stands in front of me with his legs asprawl. He hooks a thumb into his holster slung low around his waist with a .44 Magnum. He reads from the book, the words ugly and clunky in his mouth with his thick dumb rural accent. “‘Now on a naked snag in triumph borne. Was hung on
high, and glittered from afar. A trophy sacred to the God of War.’’ He looks baffled. “Poems?” he asks no one in particular.

It’s Latin, you dumb ass, I say to myself because there’s a hand covering my mouth. An idiot like you wouldn’t even know what it is. He looks disgusted. He flips to the front of the book, rips-out a handful of pages, and stuffs them into his chest kit.

He didn’t just do that. I didn’t just see him do that. Who does that? Who destroys things that aren’t theirs? Who destroys sacred things? I look at him with wide eyes like I’m expecting a bolt of lightning to strike him down from the Heavens. I see this happening in my head and I keep waiting for it to happen. See? God’s not on my side. He’s on the side of brutes and bullies like Burke.

There’s something else to understand about Gold and his books. Gold kisses his books. This is a fact. He does this. I’ve seen him do it. Every time he lays them on the table or puts them away, he kisses his books. Not all his books. Just his holy books. The ones written in Hebrew. The ones he said were dictated to Moses by God. I’d never ask to borrow these books. It wouldn’t make any sense. What would I do with them?

The first time I saw him kiss his book, I found it very odd. It was a strange thing to see. You kiss people. You kiss babies and horses and dogs. Baby horses and baby dogs. You don’t kiss books. Who kisses books? He did it in a way that was totally natural, like how I pull my hair back into a ponytail or tie my shoelaces. So I realized this was something he’d been doing his whole life. In my head, I figured it was because he was a doctor. That’s what doctors do, right? Heal things. Repair things that are broken and injured. I figured the book was damaged and I couldn’t see it. Maybe it had a broken spine or a cut across the cover over the spot he was kissing. When I asked him why he did it, he told me it was something the Jews have done since they stood at Mount Sinai and the cloth of Heaven was pulled down to the world, and the Torah was written on it. It’s not a token of affection. It’s a sign of reverence. Books aren’t just physical things.

Now here’s something to understand about Burke. Aside from fucking his sister, he’s a smoker. He’s going to use those pages to smoke his weed. He’s going to roll his filthy mixings into those beautiful words written on beautiful paper, and light them up between his crude lips and dirty fingers. He’s going to incinerate beautiful artifacts and send them up in smoke, reduce them to ashes to fuel his filthy habits. Who does something like that? Who destroys precious beautiful things?

He tosses the book down to my feet. I thrash against Kingston and Hartley. After a half-hearted struggle, they let me go. They’re loyal to Burke out of a code of brotherhood. They don’t want to be part of his dumb vendetta any more. You can tell they’re tired, dirty, and hungry. They just want to strip-off their rigging, rack their load-out, scrub the dirt off their faces, and fill their slack bellies with hot food when the dinner bells ring. Who could blame them after a long boring guard shift on such a beautiful day?

I pick-up the book, and brush the dirt and broken grass from its cover. I flip through the pages, torn and ugly. Books shouldn’t be destroyed. That’s vandalism. Knowledge shouldn’t be destroyed. If I were bigger, I’d kill him. I’d do this.

Now don’t lose your temper, I tell myself. I take a deep breath and count to ten. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Five. Five. Fuck. It’s not working. It’s not going to work this time. My sense of justice’s been firmly violated. I have a limit and it’s been crossed. The only justice can come from my own hands. I could tattle on Burke, tell Tommy and his Vigilance Committee, but they’d just laugh at me. I’ve been here long enough to know what they’d say if I went to them for help. ‘I reckon them boys were just having some fun,’ they’d say. ‘Lighten up, Tex’s Girl.’
Lighten up! My whole body stiffens in rage. I feel like I’m suffocating. All I can think about is beating Burke to a pulp. Beating him into the ground until no trace of him remains. I want to crush him like he’s some dumb animal under my foot, like you’d crush a snake or a rat with a rock. Like vermin.

He regroups with Kingston and Hartley, laughing and joking. They start walking toward the powerhouse with their backs to me. No. This can’t stand, I tell myself. You can’t let big things like this slide. You can’t wait for things like this to go away. It doesn’t work like that. You can’t cower and cover it up. If I pretend this never happened, it’ll become a festering wound that’ll end-up killing me. I have to excise it. I have to confront it.

What’s he got against me? I intend to find out. I’m not afraid of him. I look at the ground for a stone or a rock to throw at him. No stones or rocks, so I do the next best thing. I claw-up a clod of dirt and hurl it at him. Bulls eye! It hits him square on the back of the neck. He halts, holds his hand to where the clod hit him, and turns to face me. “What’s that for?” he asks.

“Why are you always picking on me?” I ask.

“I ain’t picking on you. You’re a goddamn feral bitch. It ain’t my fault the way you are. Your mama’s a feral bitch, your daddy’s a feral bitch, and you ain’t gonna amount to shit ‘cause you’re feral bitch-made!” He sneers, daring me to challenge him. Kingston and Hartley’s lips curl into mocking smiles. They’re enjoying this. I suppose it’s an easy fight for them. Three big men against a little girl.

“I’m surprised you can read, you inbred redneck fuck,” I say. This pleases Kingston and Hartley. They laugh.

“Who needs to read?” Burke asks.

“Someone as dumb and ignorant as you!” I yell. “All you know is dirt and shit and mud!”

“Book-learning ain’t gonna feed the pigs or manure the potatoes!” he yells. “Poetry ain’t gonna dig you a ditch, you stupid bitch!”

I laugh. I laugh because he’s made a clever rhyme while dissing the art of poetry. I find this irony very funny. His face flushes dark with anger. He scowls and his lips tighten into a thin white line. This makes me laugh even harder.

“You can’t eat a poem to stay alive, you dumb cunt!” he yells.

I think about this and he’s right. This is the point where someone with a cooler head would just end the argument and walk away but I’m not that type. I’m not that type at all. “You’re nasty as fuck, you fucking creep!” I yell. “You fuck your own blood, you sick piece of shit! If your old man were still alive, he’d cut off your dick with his razor!”

I guess mentioning his dad cutting off his dick crossed the line. I’ve pushed him over the edge. He comes at me and grabs me by the collar of my t-shirt. He jerks me against him till we’re nose to nose. He intends to hurt me. I can see this clear in his eyes and I can feel it in the menace of his muscles. His hot breath on my face.

“If you were a man, I’d kill you right now!” he yells. “Ferals like you got no business living! You should’ve been drowned at birth. Swung from a soaped-up noose. Someone oughta stomp and drag your ass!”

He’s too big. I know this. I can’t win. But I won’t go down without a fight. “Blood fucker!” I yell. I
fight against him, grasping for leverage. My hand claws at his holster. My fingers tell me it’s open so I grab the large butt of his pistol and poke the barrel into his abdomen. He drops me, springs backward, and flags his palms in surrender. His eyes are wild, his face is pale, and his breath comes quick. I target his chest. I target his chest with his own gun. The gun he was too lazy and dumb to secure in his holster.

“I’mma just fall back now,” he says, his tone apologetic.

“Don’t ever do that again!” I yell. Kingston and Hartley flag their palms, their eyes darting and their faces tense. No one likes a gun pointed at them. “Gimme back those pages!” I yell. “The ones you ripped-out! All of them!”

He reaches into his chest kit and pulls-out the crumpled pages. Instead of handing them over like I’d asked, he draws them up in his hand and raises his arm over his head. The color returns to his face and his eyes sharpen, vindictive and taunting. “Come ‘n’ get ‘em,” he says.

I look at him speechlessly. What? What is this? Is he an idiot? Am I an idiot? I suppose I am. I should’ve expected him to pull something like this. Goddamnit! He’s calling my bluff. What do I do?

He sniffs contemptuously and lets the pages fall to his feet. He steps on them with his dirty boots, grinding them into the ground. “I ain’t scared of you none,” he sneers. Kingston and Hartley relax their postures. They’re going to back his play but they’re not looking to escalate. Their eyes tell me they’re sick of his shit.

I steady the pistol in my sweaty hand. No, don’t do this, I tell myself. There are other ways of dealing with this. You can settle it other ways. You could get justice for this. It’s obvious what happened, even without witnesses. Burke vandalized my stuff. He took my stuff without permission. I could make a strong case to Tommy and the Vigilance Committee. I have proof. Ripped pages and a dirty book. Surely I’d have justice.

Burke gestures at the pistol in my hand. “Use both hands if you’re fixing on aiming it proper.”

What? What’s he talking about? Only a lunatic would joke around with a loaded gun pointed at his chest.

“Careful with his gun, honey,” Hartley says. “It goes off without much warning.”

“Just give it a little squeeze,” Kingston says. “Feel how big it’s getting.”

The men laugh like they’re sharing a private joke. Something’s up, my gut tells me, but I’m in way too deep to walk away. “Shut the fuck up,” I say, sweat rolling my spine.

“Well?” Burke asks. “What the fuck are you waiting for? You gonna work that gun or not?”

I aim the muzzle over his shoulder, intending to fire a warning shot. I want to see him squirm. Show Kingston and Hartley how much of a coward he is. I want to send a clear message. Never fuck with me ever again. The next time you fuck with me, I won’t hesitate to kill you. My limbs lighten with adrenaline and my hands tremble.

He notices my apprehension. “Nerves ain’t so good, yeah?” he asks. “Lookie here!” He flags his steady hands and spreads his fingers wide. “You ain’t put together that-a-way. Few is. Ferals sure ain’t. And you sure as hell ain’t wrapped too tight. A man’s born good or bad but if he ain’t got nerve, he ain’t shit—and it looks like you’ve got no more nerve than a goddamn bunny. And now it looks like you’re a coward to boot.”
You have a choice here, I tell myself silently. Shoot or don’t shoot. Choose, goddamnit, choose! I choose. I pull the trigger, my limbs light as air. Clack! The gun fires the dull metallic crack of dry fire. I exhale brightly. No bullets. I got played. I got played by a blood-fucking redneck who vandalizes sacred books to smoke his filthy weed. You idiot, I yell at myself silently. His guns are just props! What kind of man wears guns as props?

He growls and grapples for his pistol. Before he can grab it from my hand, I toss it back and whip it into his face. Crack! His face flashes a look of surprise a split-second before blood splatters from his nose. He recoils and cradles his face in his hands, gasping in pain. A thin ribbon of blood leaks through his fingers and drips onto the grass. I slam my pistol-wrapped fist against his jaw. Crack! He stumbles backward, folds to the ground, and lands on his back, dazed.

Something about seeing his blood stirs something deeply satisfying inside me. I jump on top of him and crack my pistol-wrapped fist into his face. He bellows and shields his macerated face, trying to fight me off.

I hear Kingston and Hartley shouting at my back. I feel their hands close around my shoulders and waist, and they fiercely tear me away. I skid across the grass and land on my side, the gun flying from my hand. I look up and see them bent over Burke. He lays on his back with his arms limp at his side, his knees unhinged, and his face pulped red.

Hartley comes for me with a venomous scowl. He means to harm me. Get up, I yell at myself. Get up! Get up! I scramble to my feet and sprint toward the footpath leading to the Vale. Hartley’s bigger than me but I’m quicker than him, even without my shoes and socks, which are still on the grass. I rocket across the field, intent on fleeing from him, fleeing from the trouble that’s bound to come.
Chapter Twenty-Five

Joel glowers, his glower more glowering than usual. His eyes burn with impatience and contempt. Maybe a little pity. He sits on the edge of his bed, and clutches and unclutches his rifle laid across his lap with stiff agitated hands. He’s in a mood where murder would come easy. I know this about him.

After running off, I holed-up in the timber around the Vale, hiding from the Deltas on prowler duty. Once twilight fell, and the mosquitoes swarmed hungry and thick, I backtracked to the Dale where I found shelter below the bridge in a small concrete cubby above a closed spillway bay. No Delta on search patrol had thought to look for me there. When I heard the guard mount bells, I realized they called search patrol. I figured it was for me. When I heard the Deltas calling my name, I knew it was called for me. I could’ve really run for it, never to return again, but who runs away without their shoes and socks? No one would do this. Joel knows this because my shoes and socks are sitting on the floor at the foot of his bunk, and I’m standing here barefoot.

I didn’t care the Deltas had to miss dinner, out late looking for me. The only thing I cared about was Joel laid-up here. I knew I must’ve given him a pretty bad scare. I probably shortened his lifespan by a couple years. I’m sure his heart was pounding out of his chest. He must’ve felt so helpless and useless. I imagine he sat here overcome with horrible thoughts about me being abducted. Or eaten by a wolf. Or raped. Or raped and eaten by a wolf. I know I shouldn't joke at a time like this but you can’t waste your life thinking about such stupid useless things.

Part of me wonders if he thought, ‘Well, I hope she’s finally gotten the hint and wandered-off for good. Maybe she’s dead, and I can finally have some peace and quiet, and live my own life.’

If I were in his shoes, and someone like me returned after a big scare, I’d wrap them into my arms, and hug them and kiss them all night. My eyes would be red and puffy from crying, worrying about them and the dangers they’d gotten into. ‘Where were you? What happened to you? Thank goodness you’re safe!’ I’d yell, followed by lots of hugging. I’d sit them down by the fire and heat-up a hot bath while I made their favorite brew-up. Joel would never do that. ‘What the hell where you thinking, running off like that?’ he’ll probably roar and growl when he works himself up to it. I just want someone to love me and care for me the way I feel I deserve. I don’t think it’s too much to ask.

Fact is, I waited to come back to the powerhouse till I figured he’d settled down. It must be close to midnight and he hasn’t settled down at all. He couldn’t even look at me when I was escorted into his cell a couple minutes ago. He still hasn’t looked at me. He’s that mad. He’s probably just as mad as when he first found out, which must’ve been after they carried Burke into the infirmary to stitch-up his macerated face and fix his broken nose. No doubt I broke it. I felt it crack beneath my fist. At first I didn’t think he’d admit to anyone he was beaten-up by me. Beaten-up by a girl half his size. If I were him, I probably wouldn’t tell anyone. I’d say my foot got caught in a rabbit hole or I ran into a low branch. Something like that. The possibilities are endless.

After hours of solitude and reflection, I realized something about bullies like Burke. You ridicule what you fear. It’s that simple. You laugh at what you fear to make it seem innocuous. I do it with Eve. Burke does it with me. He fears me for some reason, or whatever I represent to him. Puritans. Yankees. Tomboys. Maybe he hates the way I dress. Maybe he hates girls with freckles. Who the
fuck knows? He has his prejudices and he’s governed by them. Maybe a Northerner injured his pride once and he can’t get over it. It’s not my problem. Some people have to blame their problems on other people. It’s all they know how to do.

I know punishment will be severe for breaking so many rules but I don’t care. I feel my bruised bloodied stinging fists and I think about what happened, and I’m glad. It was worth it to defend myself and to defend Gold. I’m proud to have defeated a bully twice my size. I feel defiant, righteous, vindicated, and honorable. If Joel and I were anywhere else in the world right now, I’ll bet he’d be proud of me, too.

But he’s not proud of me right now. Not at all. He looks at me directly. I feel his thoughts gathering-up. I can see the blazing hatred for me in his eyes. I’m not imagining it. His disgust’s palpable. He despises me. He’s deeply disappointed with me. Maybe he pities me a bit, too. It makes me want to match it. It makes me want to rise to his anger and throw it right back at him. It’s a challenge and I take it up eagerly, even if part of me knows I’m at fault. Sometimes you’ve got to attack to defend, even when you know you’re wrong. It’s one of the ways of the world.

“Lost your voice?” he asks, his whole manner edged in venom. “Go on, spit it out.”

“It’s not my fault,” I say, knowing it’s not what he wants to hear.

His jaw sweeps into a firm stubborn aggressive line. Hard lines settle around his mouth.

“I didn’t do anything wrong!” I yell.

“You tried to throw down on him?” he asks. “Shoot him up some?”

“Ask him. He started it.”

“I’m asking you and I ain’t asking you again.”

I shrug. “I just wanted to warn him.”

“Warn him?” he asks, his voice incredulous. “Do you even know how close you came to plain murder?”

“I was defending myself!” I yell.

“There are rules and the rules need respecting!”

“There rules,” I say.

“No rules you need to be worrying about but theirs! It doesn’t matter if you like them or not—they ain’t yours to think on! Know what needs to get done and do it! Make your word and keep it!”

“There are too many to follow.”

“So things ain’t suited to you here? A clean bed? Three hot meals? A roof over your head? You’re sure mighty particular about them things.”

“Chores? Curfew? Shoveling shit? Boston was better than this!”

“You can’t live here and do nothing!”

“Then I don’t wanna live here! I hate it here! Everyone’s against me! Even you!”
He stiffens and draws his lips straight, hard, and bloodless. “Now ain’t that a pretty little speech.”

“It’s the truth! I wish we never came here!”

“I reckon you’ve gotta choice, yeah? No one’s stopping you from leaving.”

I gasp at this. I realize how angry he must be to say something like this.

“If you’re gonna leave,” he says, “go on and tell me first so they don’t send out no goddamn search patrol.”

“Fuck you, Joel!”

“After what you pulled today, no one’s gonna be wringing their hands when you’re gone from this place.”

“I’m not sorry for what I did!”

“Own up to it!”

“I’m not apologizing!”

“Save your boasts!” he yells, his eyes flashing dark brilliance. “They won’t look so damned nice when I’m through with you! Now, I’m tired of explanations and I’m tired of excuses. You’ve gotta respect the rules, same as everyone else. Are we clear?”

I grate the inflamed mosquito bites dotting my arms until they ooze blood.

“Are we clear or ain’t we clear?” he asks.

I don’t respond, unrepentant.

“I see,” he says, his voice quiet and his rage burned down to cold ambivalence. “I reckon you need some time to think on it then. For the next month, if you ain’t eating, sleeping, praying, working, or learning, you’re at Zeta.”

I gasp. “You’re grounding me?” I yell, my voice incredulous.

“You think you deserve some kind of special consideration? Well you ain’t getting it! You defied authority and broke every goddamn rule! I keep drawing the line and you keep busting over it so I’m setting down on you hard! Things are gonna change considerably around here. No one’s playing your games no more. I’d better not see you here, Eden, the Vale, the lake. Nowhere! Do you hear me?”

“Bullshit!” I yell.

“You’ll manage,” he says. “See you in four weeks.”

I grab my shoes, fuming. I want to tell him to take his punishment and shove it up his ass but I don’t. I pity him. His passivity and spitefulness. He doesn’t have the balls to punish me properly like his brother. To settle things in one painful quick shot instead of dragging it out for a whole fucking month. I’m going to be reminded every day for the next month of what I’ve done. One month feels like an eternity here. I’ll die before it’s over. I’ll die if I have to stay in Zeta for a month. There’s nothing more ferocious than a pack of teenage girls—and I’m about to find out how true this is.
I rouse from a deep sleep, laid in my bunk. I open my eyes. There’s no light I can see. It must be the middle of the night. Why did I wake, I think to myself, but the thought leaves my head as soon as it enters because I’m too dazed to process anything. Just as I drift back asleep, a distinct sound echoes the room—hushed giggles and a giddy squeal. That’s the sound that woke me. I’m sure of it. I open my eyes in alarm to movement all around me. My whole body tenses in panic. I look around and candlelight arcs through the room, sharpening a large group of Zetas stalking down the main aisle, headed straight toward me. None of this makes sense but one thing’s certain—they’re coming for me!

I scramble from my bunk, intent on getting away. They pounce on me in an explosion of boisterous squeals and frenzied shrieks. I scream and howl, trying to push them off. They clutch and claw at me, giggling and laughing. I writhe frantically and fight against them, kicking and scratching and screaming. Don’t bite them, I urge myself. You mustn’t do it!

I’m thrown back onto my bunk, face down, and dragged across it. I’m stripped naked, my panties and t-shirt yanked free. Girls cling to my hands and wrists, and my arms are pulled above my head. Someone sits on my shoulder. Others sit on both of my arms, pinning me to the mattress. My legs are spread wide apart and more girls sit all along them. I try to fight them off but it’s useless.

Someone comes over to the head of my bunk and stands in front of me. I exhale brightly. It’s Ashley. She’s holding her big wooden hairbrush in her hand. The one she uses to comb her long thick wavy golden hair. She’s got an angelic smile on her face. This makes everything worse. I peer around at the other girls holding me down and realize they’re all in her clique. The flickering flames of the lanterns sharpen their faces, hostile and giddy. They mean to harm me. I know what I’m up against with a mob. A mob is like a wildfire. Nothing can stop it. A mob has to roar and rage till it burns itself out.

Ashley’s had two weeks to fester over what happened with me and Burke. She’s out for vengeance, out for blood. Her anger’s been simmering for two weeks and tonight it’s boiled over. I remember something distinct now. Earlier tonight, I passed Burke on my way back from the showers. He was on powerhouse prowler duty, his wounded face still healing beneath Gold’s stitches. I remembered thinking, he’s going to think of me every time he sees those scars. I was overcome by a sense of sweet vindication and pride at this thought. He smirked at me, and his smile was sinister and demonic. Why the fuck are you smiling at me, I wanted to ask him. Now I know why. They’re all in on it. Him. Ashley. Ashley’s clique. Miss Cheever—who should be in here right now, breaking it up and handing out punishment to everyone involved. Burke occupied or bribed her. This is clear.

Hands grab my face and my mouth is pried wide open. I scream and beg them to stop. Stiff material is stuffed into my mouth and tied around the back of my head. The taste of cotton fills my mouth and settles against my tongue. A pillowcase is slipped over my head. I can see vague shapes through it. I panic and struggle harder, begging them to let me go. Two girls sit down on either side of my head, their asses backed against my ears like bookends, holding me immobile. Two girls do the same thing on either side of my waist, holding me tight.

“You keep asking for it, don’t you!” Ashley yells. “Asking to be gated. You wanna be gated, bitch?”
Gated? What the fuck’s _gated_? There’s no time to think about this because Ashley yells, “Gate her!”

Shrill squeals and raucous giggles erupt all around me. Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack! Heavy lashes explode across my ass and thighs. Hairbrushes, belts, and hands. I scream and cry, wriggling and thrashing to escape. My head’s pushed down into the mattress to mute my howls. Soon enough I’m out of breath, struggling to breathe like I’m going to suffocate. Suffocate with the animalistic squeals of glee and amusement ringing in my ears. My ass and thighs burn like fire. I scream, shrieking and howling, totally helpless. I don’t know how many blows they give me. I quickly lose count. It feels like it goes on forever. Maybe ten minutes, maybe an hour. I have no idea.

The spanking stops and no one moves nor speaks. They continue to hold me down but they don’t need to. There’s no fight left in me. I lay on my bunk struggling to breathe, gasping for air, and slobbering all over myself. The skin on the back of my thighs feels tight as a drum, radiated in intense heat. My whole body’s covered in sweat. I feel the hot blotches of their hairbrushes and belts burning me up from the small of my back down to my knees, bruised and bloodied.

Raucous giggles build from across the room, and come closer and nearer. This sound is no good. Nothing good will come from this sound. The hair bristles at the back of my neck. Someone hushes them harshly and the room goes silent. My blood ices at this loaded silence. I feel hands on my ass cheeks, spreading them wide apart and holding them open. I cry-out, thrashing my hips from side to side, trying to clench my ass cheeks. Something cold, hard, and wet pushes against my asshole, and is slowly slipped inside me. Not that, I yell silently. Anything but that! I feel something cold, slimy, and thick being squeezed into me, worming its way deep inside my ass.

I scream, muted into the mattress. It’s the worst feeling in the world, not knowing what it is and imagining the thousands of horrible things it could be. Hands fall back and the pillow case is removed from my head. I lay across my bunk, too terrified to move, gasping wild breath, and trying not to think about what’s been pushed inside me. The girls scramble away to their bunks, dive under their blankets, and extinguish their lanterns. Some of them continue to giggle softly. Some of them try to hold-in their laughter until it explodes in hysterical peals.

I slip from my bunk to the floor. I try to hold back my tears but I’m unable and I start bawling like a baby. I crawl to my locker and grasp blindly for my clothes. I wrap a towel around myself and make my way down the central aisle. An explosion of boisterous mocking laughter fills the dorm. I wish the earth would open up and swallow me whole, swallow the dorm whole. Something hard hits me square on the back as I walk toward the door. I think someone threw a hairbrush at me. Girls convulse with laughter, their bunks squeaking under their bodies. For all the pain of the lashes and the fear of whatever they pushed inside me, this is the worst part. The shame of the public ordeal. Knowing everyone saw it happen. Knowing they’ll think of this every time they look at me.

I cut into the hallway and there's Burke, chatting with Kingston and Hartley. They were waiting for me. Waiting to see me denigrated. This is clear. His eyes glitter in exultation and his whole manner’s triumphant. I rush to the bathroom with my eyes blurred in tears. I stay there all night, trying to push-out whatever they squeezed inside me. I don’t know what it is. I think it’s soft soap because that’s what it smells and feels like. The Tau women boil down the old scraps of lye soap, add some rendered tallow and corn oil, and leave it till it sets into a firm jelly-like soft soap they use for cleaning greasy spots from clothes. I spend the whole night in the bathroom stall, waiting for the worst thing to happen. My mind makes every atrocious leap. What if my bowels fall out of my body? What if I get poisoned by whatever they put inside me?

I should go to Gold and tell him what happened. I know I should tell him. Maybe whatever they put
inside me is harmful. Maybe it’ll make me sick. Maybe Eve’s behind it. Maybe she’s the one who
gave them the soft soap. I realize I can’t tell Gold. He’ll have to look up there and I’m mortified
just thinking about it. He’d say something like, ‘Well, that’s what happens when you act different
from everyone.’ I have to pretend like nothing happened.

I can’t tell Joel, either. He’s got his own troubles. He’s no longer on my side. Even if we were on
good terms, I wouldn’t be able to go to him with this. He’d know something was terribly wrong
and he’d end-up getting it out of me. He always does. He’d make a scene and they’d move me to
the Vale to live with one of those horrible foster families. I think about this and I realize that’s
exactly what Ashley wants. That’s what she’s trying to do. Force me out of Zeta. She’s trying to
make my life at Zeta so miserable, I’ll ask to be transferred to the Vale. Well, I won’t go. I won’t be
pushed around. I won’t slink-off. I’m wounded but I’m not a coward.

I just want to live in peace and I realize I’ll never find it here. It’s impossible to have peace where
my rights are unrecognized and violated. Jackson’s indifferent. There’s no compassion or
understanding. Too many threats. For peace to come, there has to be a monumental change in the
hearts and minds of the people here. Principles of reason, justice, freedom, and humanity.
Fellowship and progressiveness. Love, basically. There’s no love at Jackson.

The next morning in Z Club, Ashley passes me with her clique. She’s smiling that angelic smile.
“Sleep alright?” she asks me, her voice cheery and bright. They all laugh like it’s the funniest thing
in the world.
I stand on the silty shore of the Great Lake. Culpepper stands at my side. He reminds me of the old fishermen from Boston with their dark tans, handsome weather-worn faces, and eyes wrinkled from perpetually squinting at the sea. Everything about him’s faded in sun and wind, including his long rope-colored hair. His leathery tanned face is impossible to read. His narrowed eyes are perpetually squinting and his manner’s genial but authoritative. Everyone likes and respects him. How could you not? He’s dependable, level-headed, and skilled. He’s got three positions of importance here. First, he’s Gold’s assistant surgeon, which he draws from his former years as a U.S. Coast Guard EMT. Second, he’s the head sailing instructor and he lives in a small apartment above the boat shed. Third, he’s Tommy’s deputy marshal and the position fits him perfectly.

We watch the lake in silence, tracking a handful of McKenzie-style drift boats and Sunfishes, their mainsheets stretched taut. Ashley and her Zeta clique lounge on the shore in bikinis with sucked-in bellies and sunburned shoulders. She tracks Burke, on his first solo Sunfish sail.

I grow bored and step into the water. I’m determined to teach myself how to swim, to show Joel I’m atonable. Today’s my first day of freedom. I had a lot of time to think about things while I was grounded. I deserved punishment for breaking the rules and for my insolence. I lost my temper. My judgement was clouded. Maybe if it was my own book that was vandalized, things would’ve been different, but it was Gold’s book. I feel very protective of him. I hear what some of the Deltas call him. A kike. They call him Jew like they’re spitting out garbage. A homo. A fag. They hate him for the same reason they hate me. We’re different. Foreigners and outsiders.

I could’ve made a strong case for vandalism and theft, and Burke would’ve had to repay both me and Gold somehow. Maybe a lifetime of sentry duty. But my crime of assault canceled-out his. My reaction backfired. Burke looks like the victim and I look like the aggressor. It emboldened Ashley to come after me, too. No matter what I did, I ended-up looking like a feral. I used bad judgment. I admit this freely. There’s nothing else to be done. It’s over.

Fact is, I always break the rules. I don’t want to be told what to do in any area of my life. I want to be free to make my own decisions. I’m determined and nonconformist. I’m quick to resent interference. I can’t control it. I repented for what I did. I know I shouldn’t have done it but I don’t know what’s wrong with me or how to fix it. I’m trying to become the person I know Joel wants me to be. Tough but dignified, honorable and proud. I’m so full of angst and I don’t know how to control it. I worry I’ll always feel this way. I worry one day it’ll come out and I’ll do something I can’t take back. Then what?

I wade past the drop-off till the water reaches my chin and I gasp nervous half breaths. I take a deep breath and slip below the surface. Darkness and pressure. I think of Briggs’ daughter opening her mouth to scream and lake water pouring into it. This makes me panic and I feel like I’m going to suffocate. I kick my legs spasastically and break the surface, coughing riotously. Enough for today. I go back over to Culpepper and watch the lake. Oars ripple the water’s surface, breaking the glassy calmness. Tucked into the hull, Burke glides his Sunfish toward a large puff. I can make-out the choppy patch from here.

“Ready about?” Culpepper yells at him, his hands knifed aside his mouth.
“Ready, sir!” Burke yells across the water.

“Hard alee!”

“Hard alee, sir!” Burke releases the rudder-tiller and the mast swings the hull. He ducks and tries to catch the boom. Dumb ass, I think to myself, picturing what’s about to happen—the boat’s going to capsize. The mainsheet luffs. The hull lurches and tosses him into the water. Ashley springs from her towel and calls out to him. I laugh to myself, watching him splash around in the water, trying to right his boat. After a moment, I remember I can’t even swim and I stop laughing. I’m not even allowed to take out a boat if I wanted to. Culpepper makes you take a swimming test before you can launch the boats and it chills me to the bone. You have to dive to the bottom of the lake, retrieve a dozen bricks, and haul them back to the shore. How can you even find them down there, is what I really want to know.

“Dammit, son!” Culpepper yells and pulls his sun-bleached baseball cap from his head. “Let your weight do the work!”

Burke leverages the boat skyward by its dagger board, climbs onto the hull, and starts bailing water from the cockpit.

Show’s over. I walk upland to where I laid my pack. I kick off my wet sneakers and settle myself over the warm rocks. I haven’t been able to sleep since I was attacked. I’m too afraid it’ll happen again. I sleep fully-clothed now. Most nights I lay awake, twisting in my sheets, and whispering Tommy’s name into my pillow. I can’t help it. He’s all I think about. I want him fiercely. I always thought he was impudent and cruel but something’s changed. He’s not impetuous. It’s just his way. He knows what he wants and how to get it. He’s wild and dangerous. Joel’s brave but Tommy’s got nerve and he can’t be intimidated. He’s strong, ruthless, and domineering.

I dream of him every night and think about him every day. I want to feel his hands all over me. I want to feel his cock in my hands, in my mouth, and in my twat. I get jealous when I think about other women taking away his attention and I wish them harm. I want him more than any man I’ve ever wanted in this world, with deep desire and longing. I want his love and admiration. Everything I do is an attempt to win his approval. I don’t care if he hurts me or breaks my heart as long as he’s around to heal it.

When I’m not around him, I’m full of restlessness and longing. I feel hollow, full of regret and disappointment, and I find myself hoping he’ll be around wherever I’m at. When he’s not around, my days lack something intangible, and my thoughts are heavy and troubled. The last month of being grounded and not seeing him has been tumultuous and frustrating.

I lid-down and drift asleep, soothed by the warmth of the sun and the gently lapping waves on the shore. I doze on and off until I hear footsteps approaching over the pebbled rocks. I sit up and see it’s Culpepper. He comes over and stands at my side. “Kid’s a fucking idiot,” he says, meaning Burke. “Third time today. Are we ever gonna see you out there?”

I shrug. “When I learn to swim.”

“You’ll learn,” he says. “How ‘bout knots?”

“I know my knots.”

“Feel like practicing?”

“Sure,” I say. I don’t feel like practicing knots but everyone knows Culpepper loves his knots and I
like his company. I leave my stuff and follow him to the large boat shed where we sit side-by-side on a smooth oak log bench. He fishes a short length of paracord from a chest pouch and rests his weight over his stocky bronzed thighs.

“You’ll always use the same three knots,” he says. “Cleat hitch, figure eight, and the bowline. You’ll use the bowline for all your rigging. The king of the knots.” He lays the p-cord between his fingers and narrates as he crafts a bowline. “The rabbit comes outta his hole, hops around the tree, gets scared, and goes back down.” He tugs a firm loop into the cord and swings it into my lap. “Done right, you’ll have a nice snug knot and a good loop that won’t jam under load, easy to untie.”

I lay the cord across my lap and weave it deftly into a bowline. Joel always says rope and rifle is all you need to defend yourself. He taught me knots when we drifted to pass the time. I absentmindedly finger the cord and zone-out on the boats idling the lake. “Ever just wanna take one of those out and never come back?” I ask Culpepper, meaning the boats. “See what’s out there?”

“What do you think’s out there?” he asks.


He laughs. “Seasickness, flies, and mosquitoes. Sharks, fevers, and hurricanes. It’s pure utter loneliness. Nothing but vast unbroken seas. There’s not a single break of color to rest the eye. Everything you own is wet, damp, and grey. You can’t wear enough layers to keep yourself warm or you’ll get dragged under when you fall overboard. And forget about sleeping—you’ve gotta hold onto your bunk with both hands or else you’ll get pitched out onto your ass. You’ve gotta be your own hunter, your own cook, your own navigator, and your own crewman. And your asshole’s never puckered tighter than watching an ungodly swell bear down the chop from the bottom of the trough—tighter than a hangman’s knot!” He laughs. “We had an old saying in the Coast Guard. Anyone who’d go to sea for fun would go to Hell for pleasure.”

We share a laugh and slowly sober. “But there’s whole worlds on the other side of the ocean,” I say. "Deserted islands. Gold treasure. Mermaids. Oyster beds full of pearls.”

“Those stories always end in mutiny and murder. All that treasure’s guarded by wild tribes—the least known and the most feared. Back in the days of big adventure, pirates and missionaries tried but they were never heard from again. If they got past the hungry sharks, the poisonous jellyfish, and the killer whales, they were eaten alive by cannibals. Giants with poison arrows and teeth sharpened-down to razor-sharp fangs. Big metal claws worn over their hands so they could fight like wild animals—”

“How’s things?” a voice asks—Tommy’s voice—from behind us. My heart skips a beat. I watch him over my shoulder as he cuts through the timber. Maria trails a couple paces behind.

“Things is quiet,” Culpepper says. He rises and greets them warmly.

My stomach flutters at being so close to Tommy for the first time in a month. I see him and I’m happy. Why? Because he’s here and I have this sense of happiness about it. I may be stuck in this horrible place but at least he’s here. He looks happy. Grinning and slapping Culpepper on his back with great affection. His smile lights up the whole lake. His smile makes me smile, too.

Maria straddles the log and sits at my side. She lays her shotgun horizontally across her lap, its patina worn smooth and soft from her big red hands. I suppose I feel strange with her sitting here when I’ve been having deep feelings about her husband. So what. What am I supposed to do about
it? I can’t control it. I’m supposed to be thinking about men. Fucking them and being fucked by them.

“You’ve been keeping yourself scarce,” Maria says and runs her hands down her abraded jeans tucked into desert ops boots.

“I was grounded,” I say.

“Burke, yeah?”

I nod my head, yes. Surely she knew this.

“Seen Joel?” she asks.

“Not yet.”

“I reckon it took the starch outta him. His legs have healed straight, both the same length. No limp. He just lost some strength in them.”

I find this very strange. Strange to hear things about Joel from her. It makes me realize how distant we’ve become and how much we’ve grown apart. I have to talk to other people to get information about him. I don’t like anything about this. It makes me feel like I’m gossiping about him behind his back. It feels very wrong. It makes me feel sick to my stomach. Gossiping about Joel like he’s someone who should be gossiped about, like the next thing she’ll tell me is what he ate and drank for dinner last night. He ate how many sausages? That many? And how many mugs of brew-up? You don’t say! It would kill me to become this kind of meddlesome gossipy person.

She watches the boats idling the lake for a minute before speaking again. “Reckon it was them Cresskills. Sector patrol. My daddy always had a bug up his ass for Arkwright Valley. Stirred-up the hornet’s nest. Before them fellas, there was game a’plenty down in the valleys. They’ve been hunting-up everything to extinction.”

I want to tell her to shut up, to stop talking about Arkwright. I haven’t spent much time thinking about that day because it’s a bitter frustrating crushing memory. Seven of us went out that day and only six of us came back, two of whom were badly wounded. It broke something between me and Joel. Things feel like they’ll never be the same between us again. I wish I could go back and stop that whole day from ever happening.

She glances at Tommy and Culpepper, engrossed in conversation at our backs. “Did he do any killing out there?” she asks in a hushed voice.

“Tommy?” I ask.

She nods her head, yes.

“I don’t know,” I say with a shrug. This is the truth. I’m not being evasive. I don’t remember much about that day and I don’t want to.

“Did Joel?” she asks.

“If he killed anyone, he was just firing where he thought they were.”

“How many did you see?”

I shrug. “It felt like the whole place was crawling with ‘em.”
“Reckon Tommy was riled-up?”

“We all were.”

“You don’t recall if he killed?”

“If he did, I’m sure he didn’t mean to. Why?”

She struggles for words. “I suppose he’s changed manner.”

“Like how?”

“Something’s come over him. I don’t know exactly what. A change in his way of looking at things. I reckon I oughtn’t tell you this but I feel like I’ve gotta.” She exhales one long breath and stares at the lake. “I always had a premonition of trouble when y’all came fanning out here, like something terrible would happen.”

“Do you mean with Joel?” I ask. “Like getting shot?”

“My daddy had a story about a cowboy. He was a good man but bad luck rode his trail. He was cursed, trailed by the Grim Reaper on a flaming stallion. He never knew when or where or how it’d strike but everyone around him died somehow. He found himself doing a whole lotta good deeds trying to even-out the odds, helping folks in need and righting wrongs.” She sighs deep. “Well, I reckon we’ll manage. Y’all are here and whatever happens has to be endured.” She palms her shotgun and rejoins Tommy. “I reckon we’ll be getting back,” she says to Culpepper.

“You go on ahead,” Tommy says to her. “I’mma finish up here.”

She doesn’t like this idea, for whatever reason. Her body kind of stiffens up and her thin lips pull even thinner. She slides her eyes over me, salutes Culpepper, and cuts through the timber. I sit and watch the lake as Tommy and Culpepper chat at my back about very boring things. Tides, traps, planting schedules, hay crops, and irrigation. I’m consumed with impatience and parched in sun so I head back to the water.

I stand over the drop-off, splash my sunbaked shoulders, and watch the boats until my eyes burn with sunspots. As I spring onto the shore, something sharp rips open the ball of my foot. I curse and pull up my leg to inspect it. A long deep gash bleeds-out from where I felt the slash. I curse and hobble upland toward my pack. My first day back after one month of being grounded and I’ve already fucked it up! Joel’s going to be very angry when he finds out. A man’s only as good as his feet, he always says. When we were drifting, he forbade me to go barefoot, vigilant for snakes, and in bodies of water, wary of stinging fish hidden among the jagged rocks. Brittle clamshells, glass shards, and sharp pebbles. You idiot, I yell at myself. You know better than to go barefoot when you can’t see where you’re putting your feet.

“Hurt yourself?” Ashley asks as I hobble past the Zeta clique.

I don’t respond.

“I wouldn’t piss on you if you were on fire!” she yells. “I hope they have to amputate your foot, you feral bitch!”

She gets a big laugh out of this. So what. Culpepper comes to my side, slips an arm around my waist, and helps me sit down. Blood streaks my throbbing instep and drips my heel. Cold sweat prickles my upper lip. I start to get nauseous.
“Lemme have a look,” he says. He pulls-up my leg and probes the wound. I hiss through gritted teeth at his fingers probing my tender skin.

Tommy comes over and looks on. “She’s white as chalk,” he says to Culpepper.

“Can you take her up?” Culpepper asks him.

“Nothing I can’t lift,” Tommy says with a wry smile. What a time to make a joke. I suppose it’s not his foot that’s injured. Why should it bother him?

“I’m fine,” I say, trying to brush it off.

Culpepper laughs dryly. “After Gold patches you up.”

I curse, defeated. I know what I’m in for. For small localized procedures like my wound, Gold gives you two options. Option one: after a complimentary tumbler of pop-skull, you suffer his scalpel awake while a couple strong Deltas hold you down. Option two: you look out the window while he stands behind you with his rubber mallet held aloft and you sleep through the whole procedure if you’re lucky. I don’t want to have to make any of these decisions.

Tommy kneels at my side and draws my leg across his lap. I stiffen against him, trying to yank back my leg.

“Keep still!” he yells and redraws my leg across his lap. “Keep still and lemme tend to it.”

He unknots his bandana from his belt, winds it around the ball of my foot, and ties it tightly across my toes, holding the wound together. He pulls me to my feet and draws me over his shoulder into a fireman’s carry, my bottom aimed high over his shoulder and my legs dangling down his chest. If I wasn’t so worried about my foot, I suppose I’d be embarrassed to be carried around like this, with my ass where my face should be. He jostles me securely over his shoulder and veers toward the footpath.
Pristine blue sky peeks through the canopy. The air’s sultry-sweet with pollen. Sparrows cluster the branches, fly upwards, and dissolve into the overhanging boughs. Iridescent butterfly wings strew the earth, discarded by predatory birds.

“I wouldn’t worry none,” Tommy says. “It ain’t as bad as you think. Nothing but a little scratch. I know it feels as mean as a night of sin but don’t think about it. It’s the best way.”

I tremble at his closeness. The warmth of his body and the feel of his muscles working beneath me. I wonder how many months of deep sighing, blushing, and trembling a person can withstand before they just have to fuck it out?

“I’mma tell you what,” he says. “Know the story of Saint Jerome and the lion?”

“No,” I say.

“Then I’mma tell you. One day, a big old lion came prowling around Saint Jerome’s monastery, kicking and roaring like he wanted to take the roof offa the world. Them other monks fanned off yonder figuring it was the Devil himself lurking around in disguise, looking to devour everything in his path, didn’t wanna stick around to hear their holy bones crackling between his hungry jaws. Saint Jerome reckoned he was hurt by the way he was roaring and hissing so he picked up his paw and found a thorn. He pulled it out and patched him up, and wouldn’t you know, the lion was so thankful, he followed him around for the rest of his days, tame as a kitten.”

“Joel would’ve skinned him alive,” I say.

He laughs. “Nothing’s stronger than the king of the beasts.”

“You would’ve bagged him. Another trophy for your wall.”

“I reckon I would’ve prayed. Prayed for an angel to lay a hand over his hungry maw like Daniel did when he was cast into a whole den of them wild beasts. Then I’d scratch him behind his ears till he rolled over and purred like a kitten, swishing his tail.”

I picture this in my head and laugh unguardedly.

He comes to a stop and looks at me directly. “Now ain’t that something?” he asks. “I made you forget all about that damned foot for a second.”

In Joel’s absence, Tommy’s a strong steady familiar voice. His authority and persuasiveness is compelling. His recklessness holds my attention and his contempt stirs my devotion. I knife my hand into his and squeeze it tight. Mine fits into his like we’re twins, like our hands were made for each other. I never want to let go of his hand. He must feel it, too, because he won’t stop looking at my hand in his with a faint smile on his face.

“Will you stay with me?” I ask. “Hold my hand when Gold patches me up?”

“You’ll be alright.” He squeezes my hand reassuringly.
“Please?”

He searches my eyes. “Ain’t in a killing mood no more?”

“You said you weren’t a man to be trifled with.”

“I suppose that depends on the meaning of trifled with. What’s your intention?”

“What’s yours?”

He thinks about this for a moment. “Well,” he says, “it takes two to make an agreement. I’m minding my own business and I reckon you’ll do the same. Ain’t no witnesses out here but the trees.” He looks at me directly. “Does it go?”

My pulse pounds my throat. I want him. I want this. I’m already wet picturing his hands on me, spreading my legs apart. Why shouldn’t I enjoy myself in this world while I can? Who knows what’s waiting for me in the next? Maybe it’s just darkness and silence and coldness. “It goes.”

He smiles faintly and veers-off the footpath toward deeper rougher woodlands. After a short hike, he breaks through the thick scrub and comes to a spot where the noble hemlocks grow tall over a shaded circular spot. The ground’s covered in short grass and swaths of purple flowers. Beautiful, hidden, and peaceful.

Beneath the fragrant crested mantles, he leads me to the ground, carpeted in years of long soft spongy needles. He lays down his shotgun, rips aside his plate armor with his t-shirt, and tosses the rest of his load-out to the ground. He stands in front of me, stripped to the waist. “Go on, take that off,” he says and gestures at my bikini.

I yank off my top and fling it to the ground. I do this no differently than if I were undressing in the dorm after a long hard day of chores and couldn’t wait to flop down onto my bunk.

“What’s the rush?” he asks. “If I had your body, you best believe I’d be flaunting it.”

I believe him. I believe he finds me beautiful and desirable. I try to imagine myself as my opposite. A mature feminine seductive woman. Someone who’s had lots of sex with lots of different men in lots of different positions. Unpredictable, sexy, passionate, frivolous, glamorous, and exciting. A sultry voluptuous seductress. I think about those qualities of femininity and try to be that, and I linger my bikini bottoms down my thighs. I step out of them cautiously, trying to be delicate and mysterious. I suppose it looks awkward because it feels awkward, like an innocent girl trying to look haughty and sophisticated.

We stand there looking at each other, taking each other in. He rubs his chest, petting the hair. I see him taking-in my whole naked body. My breasts, my belly, my twat. His eyes go soft. He likes what he sees.

“Touch yourself,” he says.

“Where?” I ask.

“Wherever.”

I think about this for a moment. Where would a man want a woman to touch herself? My breasts? I like my breasts but everyone has breasts. Even men have breasts. Breasts are just something I have to squash into my bra so they don’t get in the way of doing useful things. I should touch my twat, I suppose. I picture myself spreading my legs wide open and showing him my bare twat. Pulling it
open and spreading it as wide as it can go. Pink and shiny and smooth. Something a whore would do in a whorehouse. I’m not a whore. I’m just a girl with an ache between her legs that needs to be fucked away.

I take my breasts in my hands. I rub the soft undersides. I lift them from my chest and squeeze them together. He likes this. I can see it in his eyes. He comes over to me, takes my breasts from my hands, and pushes them gently together. He looks at them like he’s never seen a woman’s breasts before, though he shares a bed with Maria so I suppose he sees breasts every single day of his life. He rubs his face against them and licks the valley between them. He presses one into my chest and the whole thing disappears completely beneath his hand. It makes me feel dominated and small. He rolls a nipple between his fingertips. I gasp and push myself against him, making little pleased sounds as he sucks and kisses them.

He takes my hand and leads it over the hard bulge of his cock through his 5.11s. It feels lethal. My pulse pounds my throat. I’m overcome with the same sense of exhilaration like when you’re about to get yourself into trouble, or when you realize trouble’s come and found you. He rasps-down his zipper and leads himself out, putting his cock in my hand. He watches me squeeze my fingers around it. He rubs his hand between my thighs and slips a fingertip into my split. I exhale brightly. This is a million times better than I imagined in my fantasies. I suppose it’s because he’s here and this is real. This is happening.

We push against each other like we’re slowly fucking, playing with each other. The only thing I hear is our soft sighs of pleasure. There are no other sounds worth hearing in the world. He asks me if I like it, if I like what he’s doing. I make a little sigh and push myself closer. I don’t want to play anymore. I want him to fuck me. I want to fuck. The ache between my legs is driving me crazy. It feels unstable. I can’t hold myself still. My whole body’s on fire. He must be burning-up, too, because he eases-out his finger and hurriedly strips down naked, never taking his eyes off me. He lowers to the ground and backs himself up against a tree, tenting his legs. His cock looks very dark against his pale hips, as white as the inside of an eggshell. You wouldn’t expect to see skin so fragile on a man like him.

“Come’re, Ellie,” he says and beckons me forward. My knees almost give out at the way he says my name. I love the way it sounds in his mouth and on his tongue. When Joel says my name it’s a mutter or a grunt or a bark, like he’s spitting something bitter out of his mouth. I go to him and sit myself down between his legs. I kneel between his knees, sitting back on my heels. This is happening. I’m here and he’s here, and this is happening. His cock’s right here, like it’s the most natural thing in the world. Us sitting together, alone and naked, dying to fuck. He puts his hand on my face and traces my lips with his thumb. He looks at me like someone who knows as soon as he finds something he likes, he can gain possession of it. He can have me. I give myself over to him completely.

“I need those lips on my cock, yeah?” he says. “Would you like that?”

“Yes, Tommy.”

He exhales brightly. “No teeth, you hear me?” he says, his voice disciplinary. “I’ll knock them clear outta your skull, every last one of ‘em. You’ll be picking them up off the ground. Are we clear?”

“Yes, Tommy.” I’d never hurt him. I know I tried to hurt him before but I don’t want to hurt him. I suppose he trusts my word because he takes my hand and puts it on his cock, watching my fingers squeeze around it. It’s very hard and as thick as my wrist. My hand barely fits around it so I use both of them. I hold it and admire it in my hands. I look at him. His eyes are glassy. I’m not even
sure he could tell me his name if I asked him what it was. I move closer and press his cock against my belly. It looks even bigger like this. I slide it between my breasts until it hits my chin. If my breasts were bigger and squishier, it’d hold it between them and hug it to my chest. I wonder what it’ll feel like when it explodes inside my mouth. What his come will taste like. I suppose it’ll taste like his cock.

“You like that?” he asks. “Wanna suck it? Wanna put it in your mouth? Wanna get it wet?”

“Yes, Tommy.”

“Ever made acquaintances with one this big?”

I shake my head, no.

He laughs, “I reckon you’ll be pretty intimate with this one by the time we’re through.”

I hold him in one hand and dig into his thick bush with the other. Tawny, soft, and sweaty. I arch my head downward and let my hair fall over the shaft, tickling it, while I play with his balls. I feel his hand in my hair, digging around the roots. He draws my hair back behind my ears so he can watch my face. I’m not in a hurry—there’s plenty of time for everything—but I can feel his impatience. The whimpers stuck in his throat. The way his hips lift from the ground like he can’t sit still.

I touch the head with my lips and he exhales brightly. I stick out my tongue and taste the tip, licking away a drop of precome. I run it over my lips with my tongue. Brine, sweat, and musk. He whimpers oddly, almost in anguish. I hold him in my hand, and lick and kiss the full length of his shaft, my nose pushing along it and my chin buried in his bush.

He takes my face in his hand and begs me to put it in my mouth. I open my mouth as wide as it’ll go and try to work it in, twisting it this way and that way. He goes quiet when I finally squeeze-in the tip. It just makes it. It’s a very tight fit. I bob my head, working the first couple inches into my mouth. I keep going deeper until it hits the back of my throat and I gag wetly. My shoulders spasm and I gag again. I draw him from my mouth, bringing-up a mouthful of thick saliva.

I wipe the slobber from my chin and fuck his cock with my slippery hand. I gather his balls in my other hand, arch my head downward, and draw smooth spirals over them with my tongue. I work up to his belly, kissing and licking his skin. I rub the head of his cock all over my chin and I rub my breasts against his thighs.

His hand pokes between my legs and he plays with me a bit before easing-in his finger, slippery in my wetness. Why don’t people do this all day, every day, I think to myself. One beautiful moment out of endless toil and dirt and pain to feel this pleasure with someone else. It’s all we have. I realize how much I’m enjoying this with him because all I can think about is why I’m not doing this with him all the time. I think about all those months wasted while we could’ve been doing this to each other all along.

I slip his cock back into my mouth and set it to where it was before. I want to go deeper. I want to take him in until all that remains outside my mouth is his bush and his balls. I’m dying to feel his cock explode in my mouth, to taste his come. He must be thinking the same thing because he says, “Jesus, girl, top me off,” his voice bruised and beaten, on the verge of tears.

I work his shaft with my hand and keep his head tucked into my mouth, sucking and licking. I take his balls into my other hand and hold them together over my spread fingers. He gasps, ‘Faster.’ I start to stroke his cock so hard and fast, I wonder how it can take such a beating. If someone were
this rough with me, I’d think they were trying to murder me.

His hand goes to the back of my head and he starts pulling himself up from the ground, taking me with him, keeping his cock buried halfway in my mouth as he struggles to his knees. He lays me down onto my back and straddles my head, never taking his cock out of my mouth. He sets himself deeper into my mouth and fucks himself in, going after me fiercely, his bush brushing against my outstretched tongue with every stroke. I cling to his thighs, holding on for dear life. Do all women take it like this, I wonder, laid flat on their backs with a man fucking their mouth fiercely? Does Maria do this? Is this something he asks her to do?

It doesn’t take long till he starts filling my mouth with loads of come. I try to swallow and I can’t, laid flat on my back with his cock stuffed deep into my mouth. I’m seized in panic. I choke, gurgling and sputtering his come as it continues to fill my mouth, thick overflow spilling my chin. I feel his arm slip around me, lifting me up a bit, his cock still stroking-off in my mouth as he comes and comes. I swallow and the first load goes down. I suck as he continues to fuck his come into my mouth. Swallow and suck. Swallow and suck. I do this until he eases himself from my mouth. He stumbles around in a bit of a daze and flops down flat on his back at my side, breathing loudly. He strokes himself gently in his hand and plays with his balls as he gathers his breath.
That's it? It’s over? Now that it’s over, I want to do it again. I suppose I was too overwhelmed by everything to really enjoy it. I didn’t come but I’d like to come. I want Tommy to make me come. This makes me feel extraordinarily mature when I hear myself say it in my head. Me, asking a man like him to make me come.

I set myself down between his thighs, and lick the slobber and come spillover from his balls. He’s covered from his belly to his thighs. He digs into my hair as I do this, watching me. The placid look on his face tells me he likes it. I’ve never seen him look so content and peaceful and untroubled, like he doesn’t have a single care in the world. I didn’t even know his face could look like that. I like being the one to put this look on his face. I realize the man I see day-to-day running Jackson is very different than the man who’s here, laid at my side. I suppose it must be very stressful to run this place. The people here are difficult. They don’t trust and accept others easily.

I take his cock into my hand and I squeeze it tight. It twitches and starts to grow bigger. I never want to let go of his cock. I curl my tongue into his bush and run it smoothly against his balls. I kiss and lick and suck his belly. I climb up to his chest and lay myself over him. I take his hand in mine and suck the come from his fingers, one by one.

He touches my ass and feels it up. His finger runs over my asshole. I whimper and spread my legs wider. My thighs are on fire. He slips a finger into my split and it falls right in. He pushes it deeper than it’s ever gone before. He asks me if I like it and I whisper, Yes. His finger’s a weak substitute for what should be in there but I suppose if we already fucked, there’d be nothing to look forward to.

He pushes his finger a little bit deeper and asks me how much more do I want. How much more do I want? I want to take his finger inside me until his whole arm disappears. I want his big cock buried deep inside me until I can’t even see his balls or bush outside his body. I want his fingers and cock to stuff themselves into every little hole in my body so tightly, you couldn’t even slip anything else in. I want to close my thighs around him and draw his whole body completely inside me.

He tucks my head beneath his chin and holds onto me tight. He slips his finger deeper. I feel myself stretching and closing around his big knuckle. I picture what it looks like, his big finger stretching my little hole and closing around it, and it makes me feel like I’m going to come. I try to say his name but it comes out in a stutter. I can’t speak. Not when I realize how wonderful his finger feels, slipping smoothly inside me. If this is what his finger feels like, his cock might kill me. He starts moving his finger slowly back and forth, and I feel myself stretching wider. I open my mouth to make a pleased sound. Nothing comes out but a bright gasp of breath. I feel his whole length stretched out beneath me and his cock twitching against my thigh, and it’s driving me wild.

He buries his finger to the last inch. He stuffs it even deeper and I come. I come and I come. Every time I cry out, he stuffs his finger deeper. I never want him to stop. When he does, he keeps his finger halfway inside me. I keep moving my hips like I’m slowly fucking him even after my orgasm’s long gone. Everything feels just right when I do this. He pushes the hair back from my face and kisses my forehead. The warmest sweetest kiss I’ve ever felt in my life and he gave it to me like it was nothing. Like he belongs to me and no one else in the world.
Blood rushes to my face. My heart pounds in my throat. I feel his nearness and closeness and
tenderness, and I know at this moment, I can’t live without him. I feel like I want to cry. Don’t you
dare cry, I tell myself. You’ve just done a very mature thing and now you want to cry like a baby? I
feel the tears coming. If he sees me crying, he’ll think he’s hurt me. The physical kind of pain. If I
tell him it’s the mental kind of pain, he’ll think I’m fragile and pathetic. Get up, I tell myself. I
climb off him and pull to my feet. I feel spectacularly lonely, even though he’s laying right here at
my side. I realize how much I need him. How much I can’t live without him. This feeling crushes
me. I clamp down on it. It’s dangerous to think those things about him, about someone
unattainable like him.

I gather my bikini from the ground and slip it on. He gets up and starts gearing-up. He’s still got an
erection. He tucks it down the leg of his pants. He finger-rakes his hair and shoves his bangs from
his forehead. “Any man trying to lead you to the altar?” he asks.

“Meaning?” I ask.

“Meaning what I just said. You hitched-up?”

“Boys don’t like me.” I gather my hair into a ponytail and draw it past my neck.

“I suppose with my brother always around, no one’s getting a chance. Chapman took a shine to
you.”

“Chapman’s dead.”

“Plenty dead.”

I look at him directly. I want to talk to him about this. I still think about this. “I feel like it was my
fault. Like the whole thing was my fault.”

“Don’t get to pitying him,” he says. “It was nobody’s fault. His time was up.”

He’s right. I don’t feel bad talking about his death. He was such a vulgar ridiculous person, and his
death was just as vulgar and ridiculous. It was a horrible death. There was no dignity to it. No
tragedy, either. Just a ridiculous way for a man to have to die. “I didn’t like him anyway.”

“I didn’t like him much either,” he says. “Something about him bothered me. I couldn’t figure him
out. Reckon I would’ve killed him myself.”

“What for?”

“He was a damned nuisance. It was reason enough.” He laughs dryly and massages his rig. “He
was always saying stuff a man’s got no business saying about a woman. He said to me that day, he
said, ‘Miller, what the hell’s it about that girl that makes you regret she’s walking away from you
the minute you stop talking to her?’”

“Me?” I ask.

“I asked him what he was getting at and he goes, ‘Suppose a girl like that’d bang a guy like me?’
He said he was meaning to have you and asked me if I was agreeing with him. I laughed in his face
and asked him how he’d know you’d have him, and he goes, ‘I’ll be damned if I can’t get a baby
up in her. I’mma whip that ass and do some things to them pretty little tits. She’ll be leaving
pregnant.’” He shakes his head, no. “I told him I didn’t know what kinda girls he’s dealt with in the
past but you weren’t one of them, so he goes, ‘Watch me, Miller. By the end of the day I’mma get
her to make time for me.’ I told him he was a damned fool and he didn’t even deserve thinking
about a girl like you.”

“No one does,” I say.

“I do.”

“You’ve gotta wife.”

His eyes ice-over and dim savagely. “Then what the hell are you doing here, yeah?”

I drop my eyes. I spoke too harshly. My words went further than I intended. I feel possessive of him and jealous he goes home to Maria. The thought of her hands on him overwhelms me with envy. The thought of him doing to her what he just did to me is too much to bear. “I didn’t mean it like that,” I say.

“I suppose if you married a man you didn’t love, you’d stay faithful to him?” he asks.

What a stupid question. Marriage means marrying someone you love. Why else would you bother to marry someone? Marrying someone’s the end of your childhood. You’d better make it worthwhile. I know why he asked me this. The girls here marry when they’re not in love at all. Some want to simply attain the status of married women. Some want to have kids. Some want to escape the dorms. Some end-up marrying men they barely know but end-up happy anyway. Bless them. Bless anyone who still believes in happiness, who still believes there’s a God in Heaven.

“I wouldn’t marry someone I wasn’t in love with,” I say. I look at him for his reaction and for the first time, I see admiration and respect in his eyes. It feels good. It feels damn good. I could be someone good with that look. I could do good things knowing someone thought of me like this. If I’d said this same thing to Joel, he’d say something like, ‘Marriage ain’t about love, Ellie. That ain’t the point of marriage. It’s a huge amount of work. You never know what goes on behind closed doors.’

“I never figured you as the type to settle down, yeah?” he says. “No pipe-and-slippers man with a bunch of brats running around. I figure most girls wanna have some fun before they get married, get it outta their systems, let themselves get swept off their feet by a white knight on a black stallion. Pure romance.”

“That’s not my thing.”

“How about a player?” he asks. “Someone who’s no good for you but you walk right into his trap ‘cause he knows how to make you feel different than all the others. Folks’ll warn you about him but you’ll pay no mind ‘cause it’s the best sex you’ve ever had. It always ends in one of three ways. He gets tired of you and finds someone else. He gets bored of messing with you and hits the breeze. Or he straight-up kills you.”

“How long does that last?” I ask.

He laughs. “I ain’t reckoning to know but I’m damn sure willing to find out!” He comes over and pulls me into an embrace. He feels-up my ass and kisses my neck.

I can’t figure him out, extreme in his moods. I’ve seen the rage in his eyes and his cruelty when he’s feeling reckless—a savage dark brutality that frightens me. But he’s also capable of deep gentle warm affection. I want to get to know him and I want to know what qualities I draw-out and why.

“Goddamn, I wanna fuck you so bad,” he says, his voice thick in his throat. “Bend you over and
fuck you, raw and no pull-out. Just smash the shit outta you.” He massages a breast and rubs a
nipple through my bikini as he kisses along my neck. I gasp, aching for him. His mouth, his hands,
his cock. I want to fuck. I don’t want to wait any longer but I don’t want it like this, sneaking
around the woods. I want it private. Me and him shut off from the world. He must be thinking the
same thing because he says, “What do you reckon making this a thing?”

“What kinda thing?” I ask.

“Our thing. Saturdays. Me and you in the CP.”

“Me and you what?”

"Anything goes. I’m aiming to work you over proper. If you’ve gotta heap of suitors, I’m getting
into the game myself. You gonna back mine?”

“Only if you promise me something.”

“What’s that?”

“I wanna ask you something.”

“Shoot.”

“It’s kind of a big deal.”

I feel his muscles stiffening-up. He pulls away and looks at me with guarded eyes. He’s prepared
for the worst. I want to ask him a lot of things. I want to know everything about him. But first I
want to know something I’ve been thinking about for a long time. The one thing I’m dying to know
the truth about but can’t get any answers from Joel. I exhale one long breath. Here we go. “When
we came back here in May, what’d Joel say to you?”

I can tell it’s not the question he was expecting, whatever that was, because he kind of blinks hard
and asks, “What are you aiming to get at?”

“Did he tell you anything about Salt Lake City, like why we came back here?”

“You want me to talk about something said between me and him?”

“I’m just asking you if he said anything.”

“I won’t talk about him. Ask him yourself.”

“I did. I asked him the same thing.” This is a lie. I never brought up Salt Lake City with Joel. I
know nothing about it aside from what he told me in the pick-up truck on the way over here.
Asking him would be futile. He’d never tell me anyway.

“What’d he say?” he asks.

“He told me to ask you.” Again, this is a lie. Joel would never ask me to ask Tommy about his
business.

Tommy knows I’m lying because he scoffs and laughs mockingly. “You’re telling me a pack of
lies!”

“Don’t laugh at me!”
“You sure as hell can expect to be laughed at if you don’t got enough sense to stop meddling in affairs that ain’t yours!”

“I’ve got a right to know!”

“Well you ain’t hearing it from me that’s for damn sure!” he laughs.

I’ve got nothing to lose so I glare at him hard and start hobbling away on my wounded foot, hoping he’ll fold. C’mon, Tommy, I beg him silently. Come and get me. Let’s make a deal. After a second, I hear pine needles slithering beneath his boots and I feel his hand grab my arm, pulling me to a halt.

“Now don’t lose your temper,” he says. “I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“Do we have a deal?” I ask.

“So there won’t be no misunderstandings, I’mma tell you straight-up. Now don’t go shooting-off your big mouth, yeah? Folks are always eager for gossip around here and I ain’t obliging them.”

“Whatever you tell me won’t go any further than us. Like it never happened. Like it happened in a dream.” I mean what I say. I know how to keep secrets. Some people need to spit-out secrets like poison. I hold onto them till death.

“I know you think they’re dumb rednecks,” he says, “but folks are smart around here. Rumors go around and they’re not dumb. They can figure out all the evidence and assemble the facts, even the dumbest of them. You can’t do much of anything in small places without being found out.”

“I won’t tell a soul.”

He bridges his hips and looks at me directly. “It was long about a week till we got to talking. I told him to stick around for a while and throw-in with us. There’s good folks here. If he intended to add to the community, he was welcome to stay. Work hard and fight hard, and we’ll take care of him and his kin. Give back to the people what he had. I figured y’all raised hell fanning it to Salt Lake City and back so I asked him if something broke loose. He said he didn’t have it all clear in his head just yet so I asked him if he’d gotten mixed-up into something meaning trouble, and he kinda stiffened-up and goes, ‘Things don’t always shape up the way a man reckons they will.’ So then I asked him if he burned some bridges and if hellfire’s coming after him, and he goes, ‘Brother, it’s a hard country for straight-dealing men.’ Them’s his very words. You gotta different notion?”

“What do you think he meant?” I ask.

“Whatever my opinion, I ain’t expressing it.”

“Well, you’ve got one, don’t you?”

“Certainly.”

“But you won’t tell me?”

“I ain’t saying.”

“Are you worried?”

“Worried about what?”

“Worried something happened?”
“I’m sure everything’s regular and straight.”

I lace and unlace my fingers. “I feel like something’s off.”

“How’s that?”

“The first part’s clear. We got to Salt Lake City and I was put under for surgery. What happened then and afterwards is the big question. I didn’t come to till we were almost here. I asked Joel what happened and he said they stopped looking for a cure.”

“You reckon my brother ain’t playing it straight?” he asks. “Figure he’s got it all framed-up?”

I drop my eyes. I hadn’t thought about how this would look to Tommy. Talking shit about his brother. Calling his brother a liar.

“Calling him a liar’s the same thing as calling me a liar,” he says, his voice edged in threat. “You wanna back that up?”

“He’s never really taken me into his trust. He doesn’t treat me like an equal. A lot of times I wanna talk about something and it’s like he can’t handle it so he gets angry and shuts down.”

“Lemme ask you this,” he says. “What are you expecting to get outta this?”

I think about this for a moment. I don’t know. I suppose I’m just like this. Always asking questions, always demanding reasons. I always want to know the reason to things. Some people are happy to just get on with life but something in me won’t let myself leave things the way they are. I’m always asking and probing, and trying to figure-out things that are none of my business.

It’s the way I am, the way I believe mankind was born. I want to know the cause and effect. The rationality. The relationship between an event and what caused it. There can be simple details why something happened but I want to know all the reasons that lie beneath it. I guess I like hearing the details and romanticizing them, or filing them away for later. That’s the problem with Salt Lake City. Something feels unresolved so I don’t know where to file this one. It’s driving me crazy.

“Joel can handle trouble,” I say.

“No doubt about it,” Tommy says.

“But when he runs from trouble, it means something else entirely. He’d never be able to live with himself after running away from something. He’s got too much pride. That’s what I’m trying to figure out. Did the Fireflies really stop looking for a cure? And if they haven’t stopped looking, what made him run?”

“Now listen here,” he says. “Maybe where you come from, men give their word without intending to keep it but I’m telling you this. Joel’s on the level. When he gives his word, he keeps it. He doesn’t take too kindly to promises and doesn’t give them away easily.”

He’s right about this. Joel rarely makes promises. He says making a promise’s like hauling around a combat load. It starts off light but it gets heavy right quick. A promise’s a debt and a debt’s a burden.

“There’s only one man in this world who I trust,” he says, “and that’s him. I’d back him till Hell freezes over. He’s a little set in his ways and he’s kinda hard to handle in a fight but if anything ever happened to me, I’d turn things over to him and let him run this whole place. I know you reckon you can read him but he’s mighty tough to figure out. When he’s gotta problem or he’s
working on how to solve it, he figures it out himself, and once he’s gotta solution, he doesn’t worry about it no more ‘cause he’s gonna do what he’s gonna do without a single doubt in that big old stubborn head of his.

“He’s got his own reasons behind his actions and I suppose taking care of you’s always been one of them. Maybe he figured you’d be better-off by not mentioning everything, and ain’t it just like him? Always trying to bear the burden. I reckon there are times when we all do things we don’t wanna do and once we get started, we can’t stop. What you reckon’s lying’s no more than a mistake, and only when a mistake’s done over and over does it become part of your character.

“Joel’s gotta mind of his own but he ain’t a liar. I’ve never used that word about him—not ever—and if I were you, I wouldn’t either. Now, you might could doubt him, but whatever happened out there, you can bet he was being honest. Don’t go twisting ideas into meaning things they don’t intend to mean, yeah?”
Chapter Twenty-Nine

I’ve never known anyone like Tommy who’s treated me like an equal. The men in my life have always been aggressors or teachers, nothing else.

I have a million questions I want to ask him. About him, about Joel, about Texas Territory, about Boston and the Fireflies, about everything. Where do I even start? He must see all these questions gathering-up behind my eyes because he asks, “Something else you’re wanting to ask me?”

If I lived to be one hundred-years-old it still wouldn’t be enough time to ask him all the questions I want to ask him. I want to ask him all about the Fireflies. Why he joined and what it was like. Was Joel tied into his decision to join? Did he join of his own volition or out of a sense of duty to Joel? A sense of duty to Joel because the thing Joel hates most in this world is the Fireflies’ biggest opponent—the military. They killed his daughter. He wanted a simple life and simple things. A wife and a child. A family. The military took it away from him. He took very little from life. He lived simply and it was ripped away. I figure anyone with such a vendetta against the military would join its biggest rival.

The problem with Joel joining the Fireflies himself is that unlike Tommy, he’d never join a group whether it’s military or fifth column or whatever. It doesn’t matter. He hates conformity. Taking a loyalty oath would be like throwing away an allegiance to himself. He’d never allow his own blood to be spilled for something his heart wasn’t set on. He won’t carry-out another man’s orders. He shies-away from oath-bound societies. He calls them cults, says they attract lazy dumb simple people with small minds.

I suppose I’m a lot like him. If you want to join a cause, you have to nullify yourself. Make yourself part of the herd. If you have dreams, they become the dreams of someone else. This doesn’t make sense to me. To be born on this earth means you’re born different than anyone else in existence. Even if I’d been born an identical twin, we’d have different traits and personalities. I’d never give-up any part of myself for a cause, whether I believed in it or not. It’d be like giving-over my heart and mind to someone else, and I’d never do that. That’d be like selling my soul. Giving up my liberty and freedom for someone else’s ideas.

I know I sound like a hypocrite because I was ready to hand myself over to the Fireflies to further their cause. I know this. I felt if my immunity could save lives, I’d support whoever wanted to harness it. It just happened to be them. I’ve changed a lot since then. I was a dumb sheltered naïve 14-year-old girl who didn’t have a clear idea about anything. It’s very simple, actually. Now that the Fireflies don’t want me, I don’t want them either. I care little about them. I see things differently than I used to. Enough about my ideas. I want to know more about Tommy’s, so I ask him, “Why’d you join the Fireflies?”

His eyes drift into the middle distance. “I suppose every man needs a belief so he doesn’t go bad, whether it’s stirred by God, blood, revenge, or rallying behind a flag.”

“You believe in their cause?”

“And what do you reckon’s their cause?” he asks.
I think about this for a moment. Their cause can’t simply be finding a vaccine and a cure. It can’t be. Because if they stopped looking for a cure like Joel said, what’s left? Nothing. Nothing at all. Like all militia, the Fireflies want power, authority, and influence, but this isn’t a cause.

I was raised in a military prep school, so it’s shaped a lot of my ideas about the Fireflies. I found the order and discipline of the military oppressive. I suppose like all rebellious kids, I thought fifth columns were cool. Anti-establishment. I was in awe of the Fireflies because they were the most prominent militia to oppose the military. They have a dedicated permanent core of soldiers with permanent bases and homes. They can do this because they have the network and resources to train, feed, and house battalions. To have that kind of power and organization without the aid of the US Armed Forces is admirable.

When I was younger, I thought about joining the Fireflies. In a way, I admired them. Most fifth columns don’t stick around very long. Resources, you know. The Fireflies have been fighting doggedly against the military and its QZ agencies such as FEDRA since the beginning of the Critical. At this point, it’s clear the military’s a force they can wound but never kill. They look stupid and stubborn but somehow it makes them seem cool and valiant. I realize they have a deceptively-easy sell. They look like they’re on the righteous side of oppression because they’re anti-military and anti-establishment. All they have to do is say the military’s oppressive and unjust, and that they use innocent men like sheep for slaughter. The message of resistance sells itself. Do you want to be reduced to a bloodstain for the faceless military machine? Or do you want to fight and die for a noble cause? It’s as simple as that. They use it to their advantage for morale and recruitment.

The military thrives on obedience. They don’t tolerate difficult people. Difficult people aren’t difficult when they’re dead, so they kill dissidents and renegades. The Fireflies differ. They find more value in warm bodies because they’d rather convert them to their cause. They round-up rebels and rogues, and try to convert them. This is another reason I’d never join. Who the hell wants a weak-willed convert? An imitation of a soldier? An imitation of a Firefly or whatever? They scout hard for men like Tommy and Joel. Wild exiled men living on the fringes of society, ambitious and reckless. The Fireflies will buy your loyalty if they can’t convert you to their beliefs. I suppose they’d find me valuable, too, because I’m rebellious. So what makes me rebellious? I rebel when I feel oppressed. I rebel when my sense of freedom is threatened or trespassed. I guess that’s what all rebels fight for. Freedom. Freedom from those who oppress them. Heroes are always freedom fighters.


He scoffs at this and laughs derisively. “Freedom from who? From what? Whose country do you reckon you’re fighting for?”


Tommy actually said this. He actually said the Fireflies were still looking for a vaccine and a cure.

“But Joel said they stopped looking.”

He sets his head aggressively. “Now listen here, Ellie. It might could feel like something’s going on that’s not showing on the surface but he must’ve been in a bad way and didn’t wanna put notions in your head. I suppose it only comes natural to a smart girl like you trying to bust open a great big mystery. I reckon folks like to talk, guessing and making things up to fill-in the blanks, and maybe the real truth about what happened out yonder’ll never be told. Whatever you’re
thinking about what happened out there doesn’t make a lick of difference. His word’s good enough for me and it should be good enough for you.”

I’ve pushed him too far. This is clear. He still hasn’t told me why he joined the Fireflies. I picture him in a Firefly uniform. He must’ve made a very handsome soldier. He looks like someone who was born to wear a soldier’s uniform. I picture Joel wearing one and I almost laugh. Totally ridiculous, like a costume. “You never said why you joined,” I say.

“I reckon I got sick of fighting for everything, got sick of wanting what everyone else had. The Fireflies gave me the same as everyone fighting by my side.”

Tommy likes to fight—he glorifies fighting. Joel’s the opposite. He believes no one wins a war. Both sides lose something they can never get back. “So why the Fireflies?” I ask. “If you wanted to fight so bad, why not the military?”

“I never said I felt like fighting,” he says. “Or being ordered around. Or wearing a uniform. The military tells you to shoot and you shoot. It doesn’t matter who it is. If you don’t shoot, they shoot you. No good comes from killing people like animals. No good comes from killing your own.”

“You took the oath?” I ask.

“There was no other way. It was just a jumble of nonsense words. Just a bunch of words. It didn’t mean anything to me. It could’ve been another language for all I cared.”

The Fireflies demand loyalty and it comes at the price of an oath. I solemnly swear to support and defend the Fireflies against all enemies, and I will bear obedience and allegiance to them to the best of my knowledge and ability. So help me God.

“Did Joel know?” I ask.

“I went to him before I took the oath. He told me I’d be sorry. I’d regret my decision. I wanted him to be proud of me. I wanted him to join with me. I knew if he continued like he was going in Boston, he’d be dead before long. I wanted to save his life. He wouldn’t take the oath. You know how he is. It was impossible to make him see it. Someone has to rule aside from the military, aside from FEDRA. He only saw the Fireflies as opportunists. Cultists. Renegades. His mind was set. I begged him to listen. I didn’t want him to die, or to die in prison. He’s my brother. You can’t say I didn’t try.”

“Do you regret joining?” I ask.

He slings an arm across his chest, supports his elbow in his free hand, and rubs his face a bit. “I got recruited by this red-headed sonofabitch. Went by the name of Hightower. Name fit him like a glove. A big tall brute from Nebraska Territory with a mop of fiery red hair and fierce green eyes. Wherever there was trouble, you’d find him. Me ‘n’ him hit it off like a house on fire, gallivanting around the country, drinking and killing and rioting and ruckusing without no one interfering.

“We were a holy terror, raising hell. There wasn’t no man alive who had enough nerve to look him straight in the eye but me. We shared a blood lust and needed no reason to be turned loose. If there was trouble, I wanted to get in on it, and if there wasn’t, I made it myself. I faced death with total indifference, never knew what it was like to fear a weapon in another man’s hands. Some are just born that way, I reckon, while others are forced to kill to protect themselves and their kin, take life only when their own’s threatened. But I wasn’t one of them!

“A certain satisfaction comes from being known as a man not to be fucked with but pretty soon you
start recognizing fear in another man’s eyes. It was dangerous, filled me with the need to make good on it.” He looks at me directly. “Have you ever hated anyone worse than any snake you ever crossed? Real poisonous hate?”

I think about this for a moment. I’m not the vindictive type. I only hate people when they reject me or trespass my sense of justice. I can’t think of a time when I’ve hated someone for no good reason.

“The kinda hate when someone’s hitting on the girl you love,” he says.

“I’m not that type,” I say.

“I reckon you ain’t that kind yet ’cause you’ve never had anyone to stir you up proper. It takes all sorts of things to get someone riled-up so he’ll fight. Jealousy’s one. I suppose deep down everyone’s got it inside them. I reckon you’ll fight like a warrior when the day comes for you to do it. I figure you can’t understand real love till you’ve hated someone good and proper. But you’re smart. One day you’ll figure it out.”

“Figure what out?” I ask.

He smiles conceitedly. “Figure out you’ve fallen in love with me.”

I’ll never forget this moment as long as I live. This moment lasts a lifetime. He looks into my eyes and I look into his, and it feels like time stops but at the same time, it lasts forever. I feel like we’ve known each other for a long, long time.

Something just happened to me that I didn’t think would ever happen to me in my whole life. I need to search for a whole new vocabulary just to describe what he just said to me. He said love. He said it. Love. I suppose if I wasn’t an orphan, I wouldn’t even blink an eye at someone talking to me about love. I’m not used to tender affectionate people touching me or telling me they love me. My whole life I was unloved and I was convinced I was unlovable. Joel taught me everything I know but he’s never hugged me, cuddled me, or told me he loved me. If I were to ask him about it, he’d probably say something like, ‘Love’s shown by action, Ellie. No need to say it.’ Real love’s only possible between equals, I realize. A man and a woman have to believe the other’s important and not inferior. I suppose this is why it feels like love.

“One day,” he says, “Hightower came up to me and said I was hanging around his woman and he didn’t like it one bit, said I’d be better-off dead than bothering her.”

“Were you?” I ask.

“Was I what?”

“Bothering her?”

“I was fucking her.”

“Your best friend’s girlfriend?”

“Fiancée. She was in love with me, said she loved the fuck outta me.”

“They were engaged?” I ask.

“Folks oughta be smart enough to anticipate thieves and be mighty careful about locking things up. If they don’t have enough sense to protect what they’ve got, they oughtn’t complain when
somebody comes along and takes it away. I told him I ain’t caring to share his woman with no man and I’mma do as I please without asking nobody first. He said a bullet was too good for me, unhitched his rig, and threw a punch. He knew how to use his fists. He was the kinda man who was only truly happy when he was covered in another man’s blood. There was no use trying to beat each other up. We’d tried it before and it always ended in a draw.

“Well, it takes two to make trouble and I sure as hell wasn’t gonna let him kill me. I reckon he’d had some bad pop-skull that night, figured on killing me, and had to work-up the nerve to pick a fight. Things got tense after that. He swore he’d kill me, said it made no difference where I went, said he’d come find me and kill me, even if he had to go to Hell and back. I never really jibed with the whole notion of the Fireflies and I’ve never been the type to hang around for too long, especially where I’m not wanted. It was time to play a lone hand.”

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“Whatever your reputation was then,” I say, “I think you’ve changed.”

He smiles contentedly. I can tell by this smile it’s exactly what he wanted to hear. “Well, shoot,” he says. “I can’t remember the last time I’ve heard something that’s made me happier.” He pulls me into his arms, rests his head against mine, and sighs deep. I’ve never felt such tenderness and belonging with anyone in the world. I didn’t know it was possible to feel so whole and complete with someone else.

“No shame in falling down but in giving-up,” he says. “It was an uphill fight. Took years. Can’t kill-off a thing like that right quick, gotta tame it in stages. I don’t have a single regret. No remorse. I ain’t cured but I’m reformed. Somehow I got to thinking on things. Reckon the older I get, the more I’m starting to realize there’s more to life than what I’ve already done.

“I suppose in a way I’m turning into my damn brother. He’s always been hungry for love, always looking for someone to love. Reckon that’s what you’re there for. We always said any poor girl he falls in love with won’t have much of a chance of getting away from him.”

I wake with my head throbbing viciously. Where am I? I look around and find myself on the steel operating room table in the infirmary, laid flat on my back. Gold’s here. He’s arranging blood-covered instruments into a small tray. I remember being with Tommy in the woods. Maybe it was all a dream. I hope it wasn’t a dream. I raise up on an elbow and flex my legs. My whole foot’s wrapped in bleached linen strips. Now I remember. It all comes back to me. The lake. My foot. Tommy.

“It’s over?” I ask, my tongue heavy and thick with sleep.

“You pulled through,” Gold says.

“No gangrene?”

“Keep it clean.”

“How long was I out?” I touch the back of my head and wince at the tender bruised lump from his mallet.

“Long enough for four stitches. No swimming for a week. Keep it dry when you bathe. Keep it out
of the water.” He opens a steel locker and pulls out a pair of polished jump boots, gently worn. They look like my size. “Dakota’s,” he says. He’s talking about a Zeta who died yesterday. I don’t know what happened. It was sudden, right after lunch. She was seventeen but small for her age. I suppose our feet are the same size.

“What happened?” I ask.


He sets the boots on the floor beneath my feet. They’re clearly for me. I look at them with reluctance. I suppose it’s strange to feel thankful someone died so I could have a nice pair of boots. What kind of way is that to feel about someone’s death? Well, it’s how I feel. They’re beautiful black leather jump boots, and my sneakers are completely dead and smell horrible. Gold must sense my reluctance because he says, “The dead no longer need anything.” He’s giving me permission to feel okay about this.

He excuses himself to comfort a Tau widow. She’s having seizures and ophthalmic migraines from an enormous uterine fibroid that’ll eventually kill her—his care only prolongs her suffering. “What can’t be cured must be endured,” he says. “She’ll have a good death and die peacefully in a clean bed surrounded by kind familiar faces. We should all be so lucky. Keep those stitches clean. Take care of that foot and you’ll be in those boots in a week.”

I pick up the boots, knot the laces, and throw them over my shoulder. I’ll need to pass Joel’s cell on my way out of here. I haven’t seen him in a month so I’ll stop-in and say hi. I’ll show him my new boots and tell him what happened to my foot. In a way, we’re both crippled. I’ll tell him this and I hope it pleases him.

I get within earshot of his cell and I hear Eve’s voice coming from within. I groan. I really want to see him but I don’t want to see her. It sounds like she’s reading to him from one of Gold’s pulps because she’s saying, “The rider stood in the pueblo door, his rifle held loosely, his hand caressing the stock, and his mouth set in determination as dusk fell across the dry arroyo—”

I cross into Joel’s cell and Eve falls silent. My pulse pounds my throat. What’d I just interrupt? She sits on his bed with her back against his headboard and her legs down the mattress. He sits right next to her, right at her side. Their shoulders are touching, like siblings who grew-up together. Do you know how long it took for me to get close to him like that? He hates to be touched by anyone but me and he barely tolerates it when I do. My face darkens in anger.

Joel has a pleasant look on his face. What’s this look? I’ll never forget this look as long as I live. I’ve seen this look on his face before. I’ve never seen this look on his face for anyone but me. Now he has this look on his face for her. I want to rip-off her face, is what I want to do.

The pleasant look on his face falls away when he sees me, like a curtain dropping over his eyes. It makes me feel like an interloper. I want to rip-off her face, is what I want to do.

Joel rolls his eyes over me, his expression inscrutable. “All patched up?” he asks. He’s thinner and paler than when I last saw him. His eyes are deeply lined. He looks like shit. She’s sucked all the vitality out of him.

“I need that back,” I say, meaning the book. “Gold wants it.”

“I’mma tell you what,” Eve says to me. “I’mma talk to Gold myself. You don’t gotta worry about
a thing.”

I scowl at her. I feel my face scowling. I don’t care.

“Need anything else?” she asks in an angelic voice.

I leave the cell without a word and hobble toward the infirmary door.

I hear her voice echoing from the cell, talking to him. “Why’s she always so riled-up?” she asks. Her volume makes it clear she wants me to hear.

“I’m still here!” I yell in her direction, my cheeks flushing in anger. “I can hear everything you’re saying!”

“I meant what I said!” she yells across the distance. “Makes no difference whether you heard me or not. Now go run along, child. Go rest that foot.”
“Have you ever loved a man?” Tommy asks me.

We lay naked and entwined on a military poncho liner spread over the floor of his control house office. Beyond the windows, the switchyard’s tranquil, vacant, and hushed. A hazy shaft of late afternoon sunlight cuts through the black-out curtains’ bottom hems.

You can’t see it from here but there’s a small bouquet of wild flowers on the desk. He brought them for me. From the Eden gardens. Can you believe this happened? Well, it did. Flowers—from a man to me—for no other reason than to show me how much he was thinking about me. I didn’t think this would ever happen to me in my whole life. I didn’t even think I’d want it to happen. A man giving me flowers. It’s a funny feeling to realize I like something I once thought was stupid.


“Which is it?” he asks.

“Yes,” I say.

“Who’s the lucky fella?”

“Joel.”

He laughs. “Not that kinda love.”

“What kind?”

“The kinda love that hurts you.” He draws my face to his and kisses me softly. I’m actually doing this. Kissing a man. Kissing Tommy. Kissing him feels like such a natural thing to do. Like breathing. It feels like I’ve been kissing him my whole life. I’ve never felt this closeness with anyone. Like we’re the only two people in the world. Like nothing’s outside, like the earth and the sky stand still while we’re in here. Like the world holds its breath for us.

It was only last Saturday we made this arrangement. Only one week ago. It seems like such a long, long time ago. Everything’s changed so much since then. Today started-out perfectly. Fresh wind and a bright blue sky. Gold took out my stitches to a perfectly-healed wound. I put on my new boots and they fit like they’d been made for me. After that, I went to the lake where I passed a couple hours daring myself to swim until I slipped serenely underwater without a gasp or a sputter. I opened my eyes and watched the silvery trout jolting past the drop-off. This is something that happens when you open your eyes underwater. You actually see stuff! I can’t swim well nor far but I can keep myself in the water. I’m proud of myself. I’ll tell Joel and I’m sure he’ll be proud of me, too. He’ll say something like, ‘Reckon you can swim, yeah? There’s only one way to settle it. We’ll race for it—to the dock and back. Are you game?’

“What are you thinking on?” Tommy asks.

“Swimming,” I say.
“Nothing else?” He squeezes my ass, my cheek fitting perfectly in his palm.

“I taught myself how to swim.”

“I would’ve done it if you asked. Ask me whatever you need. You can get it any time, any day. Whenever you want.”

“Joel showed me,” I say. “Before he got hurt.”

“Eve’s awful sweet on him.”

Why’s he mentioning her? How should I know? Strange he should mention her right now. But what’s strange about it, actually? Nothing, really. They live together in the same house. She’s practically family. I guess it’s not so strange when you think about it. The problem must be with me, I realize. “She calls him honey,” I laugh, hoping he’ll laugh with me.

“She calls everyone that,” he says. “It wore out faster than an old pair of shoes.”

“I can’t stand her.”

“Surely not.”

“Is there a reason I should?”

“If you don’t like her that’s your own business. I ain’t trying to influence your opinion one way or another.”

“She’s so fake.”

“It’s clear you ain’t admiring her none.”

“How old’s she?” I ask.

“Crowding forty.”

“She’s too old to be talking in that voice.”

He laughs. He knows the voice I’m talking about. Everyone does. “That baby voice’s the only thing she’s got left under forty,” he says. “Clock’s ticking. Her shelf-life’s done over. Aged like milk.”

“Why’s she not with anyone?”

“Deltas are done with her. Ran through like a train, like an old car with a whole lotta miles. It’s just a matter of time before the transmission blows.”

“Do you think she’s pretty?” I ask, not really wanting to know the answer but feeling compelled to ask him.

“She is,” he says.

My cheeks flush warm. “She’s got no personality,” I say, my voice edged in ice. Listen to me! What’s wrong with me? I can’t control myself. I can’t help myself. I feel possessive of Tommy and I don’t want to share him with anyone.

“She’s got her good qualities,” he says. “Qualities a man can’t help noticing.”
“She’s so fake. There’s nothing natural about her.”

“I reckon there’s more to her than what you see. There’s a whole lotta woman there willing to fight for what she wants.”

“No one likes her.” I’m baiting him. I know I’m doing this. I fear what he has to say but I need to know what he really thinks about her all the same.

“She ain’t the type I’d pick out myself,” he says.

“What’s your type?”

“You.” He pulls me closer and covers my face with kisses. The tip of my nose, my cheeks, my forehead.

“Joel’s type?” I ask.

“What’s it to you?”

“He doesn’t talk to me like that. The only thing he ever said to me about relationships was that people should have standards.”

“His standards,” he laughs.

“He said dating wasn’t easy. No one had the time. Everyone was always rushing around for work, to make money or to grab power. There was no time for dating.”

“Joel doesn’t tend to get thick with trouble-makers and dramatics—the type that’d scare steer offa the range with their cursing. He prefers milder critters. Ones that ain’t built like a toaster.”

“What’s a toaster?” I ask. I have no idea what this is.

He laughs. “Thick as a linebacker. Motherly. God help the poor soul who marries her one day!”

“No one’s marrying her.”

“Why’re you always scuffing-up her heels?”

“Because she doesn’t like me.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing personal. Just one of them things.”

“I’ve never done anything to deserve it, so she must not like me as a person, but she knows nothing about me.”

“She ain’t even worth thinking about,” he says.

“Yet you keep thinking about her,” I say.

“Depends on your meaning of thinking.”

“Meaning what?” I ask, my voice edged in acid.

“Don’t, Ellie,” he says, his voice soft. “Don’t get fresh. Please, don’t. Don’t play up to that.”

“Play up to what?”
“Quit it. Let’s get along, yeah?”

He’s right. I’m being hostile. I know this. I can’t help myself. I pick at her from a distance. It’s gross. I feel ashamed and dirty. Wasting all this time talking about a woman who holds such little meaning to me. She has her problems and I have mine. Why do I feel like I have to compete with her? I suppose it’s because I resent Tommy talking about anyone else but me. He talks about her and it feels like it diminishes me, makes me feel invisible. I’ve never felt such a deep attachment to a man like him and it feels very fragile. Something I have to guard vigilantly. I suppose it’s jealousy. I’ve never felt it before. I don’t know how to control it. I suppose I should pity Eve. She can’t find a man to love her in the way she wishes to be loved.

“I thought of something you can teach me,” I say.

“What’s that?” he asks.

“That whistle you do with your mouth. Would you show me?”

“I’ll show you my whistle,” he says with a genial smile.

“Who taught you?”

“Reckon I just learned. Watch me now.”

He pulls into a sitting position and I crawl between his legs. He folds his tongue backward against the roof of his mouth. He puts his pointer finger and thumb together, slips them into his mouth, and holds them against his folded tongue. He blows, spiriting a clarion whistle. I do exactly like he showed me, doubling-back my tongue, and using my pointer finger and thumb. I blow and I make a loud hiss. I try again and make another hiss. He laughs at my futile effort. He takes my hand into his, forms my pointer finger and thumb into the correct shape, and places them into his mouth against his tongue, making the whistle. I try again with my own fingers in my own mouth. I hiss air until I get lightheaded.

He forms his two fingers the way he showed me and slips them into my mouth. He rests them against my folded tongue. He tells me to blow and I blow but I still can’t whistle, not even with his fingers in my mouth. Just a dumb hiss of air. We laugh, falling against each other. He looks at me with deep affection in his eyes. He looks happy and carefree. I know I have this same dopey look on my face because I’m falling in love with him. This is something that’s happening. I don’t care if anyone believes me or not. I didn’t know you could feel like this with someone else, like you’ve known each other your whole lives and can’t ever imagine being apart. I’m shattered by this feeling. The intensity’s acute. I’m in a state of pure bliss. Lighter than air. Beyond love. They need to invent a word deeper and bigger than love to describe it because love seems too small a word. It’s not just about sex. To be near him is to feel more alive than I’ve ever felt in my life.

I want to fuck him so bad. I feel this intensely. I don’t want to fuck him, I need to fuck him. Every time I think about it, my stomach flutters. I’ve been dreaming about this for so long, since the first time I felt his hands on me. Wondering what his fucking would feel like. I’m scared it’ll hurt and I don’t know what will happen when he comes inside me. I don’t care. I want to be fucked by him for the rest of my life. Filled with his fucking till I’m dead and gone.

He takes my face in his hands and kisses me, drawing my bottom lip into his mouth. I exhale brightly and gasp against his tongue. My body starts moving like I’m slowly fucking him because it’s all I want to do, all I can think about. I take his cock in my hand and squeeze it. “I wanna be fucked, Tommy,” I say. “I wanna fuck.”
He exhales brightly into my mouth. He’s hard enough to fuck. I spread my legs wide and push the head against my split. I set it against the place where I need it to go and manage to get a little of it in. I feel myself spreading against him, already fucked-out from his tongue and his fingers. I realize soon enough I’m trying to squeeze the head of his cock through an opening that’s way too small to fit it. I feel myself stretching to the point of ripping. He’ll never fit, I tell myself. I know what fits inside me comfortably. He’s way too big. I ease him out and spread myself open with my fingers, looking between my legs. No blood. I rub my split with my fingers and look at them, expecting to see blood. No blood.

He takes my hand and looks at it, trying to understand what I’m looking at. “Something’s the matter?”

I drop my eyes. I can’t tell him he’s my first. No way. I don’t want to make a big deal. When I overhear the Zetas talking about sex, they make it seem like such a serious matter. Does he love me? Does he respect me? Will he spread rumors about me? Will he fuck me and dump me?

Fact is, I never cared about losing my virginity. Some girls build-up all the conditions in their heads. To be fucked by the man they intend to marry on a bed of roses. Laid on a blanket by a waterfall. Fucked in front of a crackling fire. This is not something I ever thought about. When I pictured it in my head, nothing came to mind. It was something I just wanted to get over with. I knew sex was inevitable. I was ambivalent about it. I wanted it to happen sooner rather than later but I wasn’t going to go out of my way to make it happen. It didn’t matter who it was with because it was nothing special to me. Now that it’s with him, I wouldn’t want it any other way.

I want to tell him so many things but how can I? I grew-up self-sufficient and independent. My mouth’s been closed to men for sixteen years. I don’t have the words to express myself and even if I did, they’d come out all wrong. I didn’t grow-up around men. I don’t know much about them. Joel’s the closest thing I’ve had to a male figure in my life but he doesn’t care about what I feel or think outside of my basic wants and needs. Terrible profound deep emotions course through me, struggling for expression. I don’t know how to express them and it’s very frustrating.

“You fighting shy of me?” he asks.

“I don’t know if I can put you in,” I say.

He laughs. “It’s a mouthful. Pull it out and make you faint.”

“I’m not used to it.”

“You can handle me.” He licks his hand and runs his glossed fingers against my split. “It’s gonna feel just right. No one else is gonna fit right after me.” He holds himself in his hand and squeezes hard, surging stiffer, longer, and darker. “Have at it, girl.”

I take his cock in my hand. With my other, I spread myself wide open with my fingers and hold myself like that. I slip-in the head. I urge myself down very slowly. It feels like it could go on forever, urging myself against him with all my might, and slowly slipping him in, slow as a snail. I buck my hips and he slips a little bit deeper. This is the only thing that works—bucking and slipping, bucking and slipping. I let myself slowly stretch and stretch till I’m stretched more than twice my normal size. I feel his cock spreading me everywhere, filling me to the last inch. He doesn’t make a sound or move a muscle, just watches me with glassy eyes until the only thing left outside me is his balls and his bush. I look between my thighs and I’m bulged to the point of bursting, with his cock fitted deeply and tightly inside me. I suppose his cock must be bulging me on the inside of my body, too. I stop thinking about how much I’m stretching when I start to feel how wonderful his cock feels fitted deep inside me.
“Rr…rrrr…ready?” he stutters.

I wiggle my hips, setting his cock a little bit deeper.

“Do you wanna…be…fuuh…fucked now?”

“I wanna be fucked,” I say, breathless.

He groans anguish, like he’s in pain. I feel his cock twitching deep inside me. I feel his thigh muscles gathering themselves up beneath my ass and a moment later, he starts to slowly fucks me. He holds me by the hips and slowly fucks me. He spreads my ass cheeks in his hands and I feel everything between my legs stretching wider. The sensation sends me over the edge. I squeal and tell him I’m coming. I come and I come, and he keeps fucking me as I come. He keeps fucking me even after the sensation of my orgasm’s long gone. He hasn’t come yet.

I realize I don’t like this position. Bouncing around on top of his cock. My breasts slapping against my chest. Pushing myself down over his cock. What kind of position is this for a woman to fuck in? Sitting up, bouncing around on a cock, like I’m riding a horse. I can’t get close enough to him, sitting on top of him. I think any position would be better than this. He must see this on my face because he pops himself out and turns me onto my side.

He climbs behind me. I already like this position better. His nearness and closeness. The full length of his body stretched out behind me. His heat and his heft. He draws my outer leg up to my chest till it presses against my breast. He holds me wide open with his hand on my thigh and he spreads me wider. He squeezes-in the head of his cock and fucks-in the rest of himself behind it. It’s a tight fit but I’m so fucked-out, it goes right in. I lay on my side and take his fucking. He plays with my breast with his other hand, rolling and tugging the nipple. I play with myself as he fucks me. I slip my fingers against his cock, feeling it as it slides in and out of me, feeling its slipperiness and the raw ripe heat coming off of us.

Just as it starts to feel really good, he pops out his cock and leads me onto my belly. I make a little sigh and hoist my ass high into the air. He climbs behind me and hoists my ass a little bit higher. He works-in the head of his cock and doesn’t stop till he’s fucking the rest of himself into me. In this position, his cock spreads me wide open. He sets his cock deeper, pushes his hand between my thighs, and plays with me. I start making little sounds of pleasure. He doesn’t fuck me, just holds himself deep inside me and plays with me.

He takes out his cock completely and fucks it back in. This feeling sucks the breath out of me. He does this again and again, clubbing me with his cock. Each time he fucks me, it feels like he’s fucking me for the first time. Splitting me wide open and setting himself deep. He takes it out and he won’t put it back in until I beg him. I groan and beg him, my ass turned up to the sky. “Put it in, Tommy! Put it back in and fuck me!” The heat coming off my thighs is intense. There’s not a single part of my body I can hold still.

I look around and realize he’s fucked us halfway across the room. I don’t know if it’s from the force of his fucking or my squirming beneath him. The poncho liner’s twisted all around us. He drags me back to the middle of the room with his cock still buried inside me and he starts to fuck the hell out of me, fucking me in a way my body was never intended to be fucked. It feels like he’s trying to put his cock straight through me.

I feel like I’m going to come. I cry-out his name and tell him. He holds me tight like he’s worried I’m going to get away. I feel his cock twitching inside me and everything gets wetter and hotter as he fucks me. I start to come. I squeal and tell him I’m coming. He fucks me for another minute after I stop coming. When he stops fucking me, he keeps his cock inside me. The only sound is our
labored breath. He dismounts and reaches between my legs. He smears his fingers with his dripping come and rubs them against my lips. He tells me to lick them and I suck the come clean off them. He loves it. He does it again and again, and I suck his fingers clean each time, rich with the taste of his come mixed with mine.

He shakes-out the poncho liner and spreads it over the floor. The whole thing’s soaked with our sweat, his come, and my wetness. I don’t know where all the wetness comes from. I’m so little and my twat’s so little but it pours out of me like a river. The room smells like the warm sweet thick smell of whatever he fucked out of me mixed with his sweat and his come. We lay wrapped around each other, sweaty and filthy in our fucking. It feels just right. He cups my twat from behind, slips in half a finger, and holds it there. I’m so opened-up by the force of his fucking, it falls right in as soon as he touches it. I feel his come bubbling around his finger.
“Was it nice?” I ask Tommy, meaning my twat and the feel of our fucking.

“Was it nice?” he asks, his tone mocking but not cruel. “Pussy’s pussy. They’re all nice. It’s like asking me if I like breathing. If I like eating.”

“Was I your first?”

“First what?”

“Virgin.”

He laughs freely. “The last virgin I hit, dinosaurs were still roaming the earth.”

“How’d you lose yours?”

“Homecoming weekend.”

“What’s that?”

“Weekend of the big game. In the back of my dad’s pick-up. I was a sophomore, she was a freshman. We knew each other from church. One thing led to another and she started making a fuss, said I couldn’t fuck her in her baby hole.”

I laugh. “Her baby hole?”

He laughs full from his throat. “She said that’s what Jesus called it, said she was saving herself for marriage. I knew what church her momma ‘n’ ‘em went to—ours—and Jesus Christ never called it that. She said we could do butt stuff and I went soft—looser than Jell-O. She started crying like a starving coyote so I backed-off and that’s when she said everything was a go. She wasn’t lying. Clean-up looked like a homicide! It took me long about a year to shake her. I had to keep a wingman on speed-dial to come bail me outta trouble.”

I don’t know what any of that means but I laugh because I love laughing with him.

He kisses me softly. I return the kiss. We kiss with open mouths until he breaks from my lips. “I swear you were built to take my dick from every angle,” he says. “I just wanna be steady fucking you.” He takes his cock in his hand and squeezes it. “They don’t grow ‘em like that in Boston, yeah? If it ain’t grown in Texas Territory, it ain’t good, whatever it is. Them damn Yankees are rotten from the skin to the core. There wasn’t nothing that side of the Mason Dixon that could keep a man’s interest up for long.”

“Why’d you go to Boston if you hated it so much?”

“Joel’s notion. Reckon he figured it’d be as good-a-place as any to reform himself.”

“What do you mean, reform himself?”

“After Sarah, something got into him. He was on the verge of going real bad the day we left.”
“How long did you stay?”

“In Texas Territory? Felt like a hell of a while. Long about a year.”

“You didn’t run?” I ask.

“Lemme ask you this. If you were faced with going somewhere where the trouble had already been or going somewhere it was going, where would you go?”

This makes perfect sense. Would I rush into a strange territory where I knew the destruction was headed? Or stay put where it had already burned itself out? Of course I’d stay where the destruction had been, knowing it’d passed. “What’d you do there?” I ask, meaning Texas Territory.

“Figured shit out,” he says. “We passed the time as hired guns. Reckon Joel never told you that.”

“No.”

“He would’ve never told you that.”

“Like bounty hunters?” I ask.

“Bounty hunters, hide hunters. Hired by folks who’d been fooled in deals gone bad and wanted us to get a line on who took their stuff. Kill the sonsofbitches who’d done it. They weren’t hesitating to strike out in revenge but they didn’t wanna do it themselves.”

“Was it hard work?” I ask.

“Killing for hire’s one of the meanest dirtiest jobs in the world. Plain murder and blood-stained hands. The only good thing about it was having a free hand in things. No boss breathing down our necks. We came and went as we pleased. We made laws for ourselves and that’s what we did. Folks rarely covered their tracks. There weren’t laws no more. You’ve seen it in this here wild country. Justice’s swift. Men don’t go about invoking a code of justice to settle their arguments. They take the law into their own hands. Might’s right. Upheaval and lawlessness. Kill or be killed.

“They always had it coming. Outlaws deserve punishment. There was a whole lotta stealing and looting going on, and folks weren’t always doing it outta greed. There wasn’t much left of value but there wasn’t much action outside of the routine.

“Everything was fair game—women and kids—sold like livestock for food, guns, drugs, sex, or to settle unpaid debts. Most folks changed their minds right quick and wanted them back, wanted to kill the folks they’d sold them to but didn’t have the nerve or skill to do it them themselves. We never asked folks why they wanted them dead but we always figured it out ourselves. It’s a simple thing killing someone but knowing why’s complicated. The less we knew, the less we cared.”

“I would’ve wanted to know,” I say.

“You would’ve figured it out,” he says. “A dying man’s likely to talk and dying men don’t lie. Folks were curious, always wanting to know who’d sent us but it wasn’t our right to say. The poorer folks are, the more important their kids are to them. When you’re poor and lazy, you can’t make anything but kids so they're as precious as gold. It’s a fact. Rich folks just ate them.”

“What?” I ask, incredulous, wondering if I heard him right. “What’d you just say?”

“Rich folks ate their own,” he says in the same matter-of-fact tone as if he’s telling me tomorrow’s weather. “Starving folks’ll eat anything. If they can’t get rats or roots or grass, they eat their own
“You saw it?” I ask, doubting him. “In Boston?” He must be joking, is what I’m thinking.

He continues speaking as if he hadn’t heard me. “Long about a couple months, things started going south. My house got raided and it shook something loose. I knew who did it but knowing and proving are two different things. They stole my ’57 Sportster—my pappaw’s vintage bike. They touched nothing else. I loved that bike. You can love a bike more than you can love a woman or your own kid. It’s a fact. You can love a bike more than anything else in the world. Folks say it’s just a hunk of metal but it’s not true. Damn I loved that bike.” He sighs deep. “I’d been at Joel’s that night. He was having a rough time of it. He’d disappear for a day or two, and show-up bruised and beaten like he’d been hugging a bobcat.”

“Was he okay?” I ask.

“No, Ellie. He wasn’t okay. When Sarah died, he went out like a flame.”

“He got sick?” I ask.

“He just went out. He used to be cool, calm, and collected. It was almost irritating how calm he could be. I always thought he was unbreakable but he fell—and he fell far and hard. When a good man goes bad, he goes out all the way.

“I’d taken to following him at night. Around the woods out back. Sometimes he walked for miles, quiet as a nun. Sometimes he threw himself on the ground and cried for hours. Sometimes he got down on his hands and knees, and tore at the ground like an animal. And sometimes, he ran around, roaring and shouting, cursing and wailing, screaming her name and ripping-up everything in his path. Killing anything he came across. I figured he had to get it outta his system. Reckoned it was better taking it outta the earth than on me!

“One night, I had a feeling about him so I took the notion to go see him. It was one of those rainy nights, the sky heavy with rain. I found him sitting on her bed. He had his gun in his hand. I reckon it’d been coming-on for a long time. His hair was all tangled-up and wild. His hands were filthy. It should’ve filled me with pity but it made me mad. He was in construction but you’d never know. He was a clean man. He lived a clean life. He always kept himself clean.

“I asked him, ‘What the hell’s the ruckus, Joel?’ ‘If you’ve been worrying about me, Tommy, you’ve been wasting your time.’ I told him I wasn’t worried none but that he’s gotta stop straying offa his range. ‘They’ve got my child, Tommy, and I’mma tear-down this goddamned country till I find her.’ I told him it wasn’t coming off like that ‘cause Sarah was dead. He’d buried her himself.”

“She has a grave?” I ask. How surprising is this, I think to myself. I suppose no one should be happy to find out someone has a grave but to have a grave—and a body to put in a grave—is a very rare and blessed thing. So there it is.

“She’s gotta grave,” he says.

I stop here. I don’t want to know where it is or who dug it. Imagine burying your own child. Imagine putting your own child into a deep dark hole in the ground and knowing it’s the last time you’ll ever see them on this earth. What man was born to do that? No man on this earth. I hold onto Tommy very tight. People are all we have in this world. It’s all we have. He takes my hand, kisses the back of it, and presses it against his chest.
“It meant very little,” he says. “There was no time. No time to cry, even. I remember Joel’s face. Whiter than I ever saw it in my life. White as a ghost. I took him home and we drank till we forgot.” He exhales one long breath. “When I found him on her bed that night ready to go, I told him there was no greatness in shooting himself with his own gun. That’s for cowards. He got up, and said he was gonna go stretch his legs and think about some things. ‘Alone, if you don’t mind,’ he says to me.

“I minded and I told him so. ‘I ain’t in a good mood, Joel. I can pop-off a shot in you or I can knock you out. Knocking you out’s gonna hurt like hell but a bullet might could kill you.’ He opened the door and started to run out. I caught him, pulled him back, and kicked the door shut. ‘Look, you damned fool,’ I told him, ‘you ain’t going out. I ain’t asking you—I’m telling you!’ He started making a fuss. ‘Lemme go! I’mma find her! She’ll freeze out there!’ ‘She would if she were out there but she ain’t! She’s dead!’ I knew there was no talking sense into him so I laid him out cold. Chopped him down with my rifle. I tied him up, hauled him back to my house, and locked him in my garage till he snapped out of it, long near two weeks.”

“Against his will?” I ask.

He laughs like I’ve made a joke. “Joel doesn’t ever ask for help. Pity and charity make him angry, fill him with resentment. His pride’s instinctual. He’s always gotta earn his way. He blamed himself. He was convinced he could’ve saved her. Every minute of every day and every night, he saw her. Sarah was inside of him—a part of him—like a limb. That part died when she died and the Devil moved in. He was wild and untamed. Full of bitterness and vengeance—a vengeful will and a blood lust. He had the manner of an outlaw and it showed more plainly than any gun he slung. When he was crossed or something provoked him, he turned vicious and inflexible with no remorse for anything he’d done. It sprung from hostility at himself and a deep anger at the world for killing his child. Once a man turns bad he doesn’t know when to stop.”
“Back where we grew-up in Texas Territory,” Tommy says, “there was a family of brothers that lived in the part of town called the Shallows. That was the Morgan side of town. Jimmie and Dickie. They were the same size and age as us but they were mean-looking. Black hair, black beards, and deep-set black eyes. Wide shoulders and thrust-out chins. They were full of contempt. There was a swagger about them, even in the way they wore their clothes. There was nothing weak about them.

“It’d started with our dads—bad feelings. They fell for the same girl—our mama. She promised herself to Lem Morgan but broke it off and married our dad. That was the start of bad blood between us. Our families always had the notion the world wasn’t big enough for the both of us. Them Morgans never did amount to nothing much. They were always stirring-up trouble or sneaking away from it.

“When I was around ten, Jimmie and Dickie jumped me on my way home from school. They stole my bike and threw me in a muddy creek. I loved that bike—a silver BMX freestyle with front and back pegs. I ran home bawling my eyes out and told my dad what happened, soaked to the bone, dripping muddy water and blood all over the floor.

“He was a big man. Joel’s got his same build, looks just like him, just like his side of the family. Two hundred and fifty pounds, all muscle, no fat. He had this way about him. He wouldn’t let no man run him, determined and stubborn. I suppose I’m a bit like him. He was as cool as they come. He didn’t walk—he loped. He wore a leather shoulder rig below his jacket with a .45 Peacemaker, like an Old West outlaw. He kept our pappaw’s old buscadero belt hanging-off a nail in the closet, and kept it smooth and pliable. He’d rub it down with oil once in a while. I’ll never forget the smell of that leather. That faint peculiar smell of horses.

“His eyes got hard and dark, and the back of his neck turned red. He got up and went into the kitchen without saying a word. I heard him talking to Mama in a low voice but I couldn’t make out what they were saying. The backdoor slammed shut, and she came and helped me outta my wet clothes. She patched me up and sat me in front of the TV till we heard Dad’s boots coming down the sidewalk. He had a grim look on his face. He was limping and had blood running down his leg but he still had that swinging gait, like an old cowpuncher, holding his head high and his shoulders proud. He was wheeling my bike at his side. Mama ran out and brought him in. I figured I was in for a beating, figured he was gonna throw me over his knee and tan my hide. ‘Lem threwed down on me first, Maryanne,’ was all he said. He had a bullet in his thigh—Lem Morgan’s bullet.

“We got to the E.R. and what do you know? There was Lem, his face all grey and his arm covered in blood. Dad had shot him through the shoulder. He went up to Lem and goes, ‘Shouldn’t have picked on my son. Shouldn’t have rustled his stuff. Now listen here. You tell your boys to leave my boys alone.’

“The Miller name was always known as law-abiding and respected, but after that, Dad made it feared. There was always room for trouble between us and the Morgans but we didn’t want it. They were always waiting around, waiting for a moment when we weren’t ready. We always knew one day we’d break their necks. Years passed and we kept outta each other’s way. Freshman year, we butted heads. They’d been shooting-off their mouths about Jess.”
“Tess?” I ask.

“Jess.”

“Who’s Jess?”

“Jess. Joel’s ex-wife.”

I gasp. She’s got a name. “He never talks about her. I didn’t even know her name.”

“Jessica,” he says. “Jess. Joel and Jess.” He says it like everyone knew who they were, like they were a famous couple back in Texas Territory. He digs around his hair a bit. “I reckon the Morgans’ hate was different than ours. They ran us down to other men and dragged our dad down, too. Them brothers stomped-off good and mad but the fight settled nothing. Reckon we could’ve beaten it outta them right then and there but we couldn’t even stand looking at them. They were always hanging around somewhere, always had an eye on our stuff. It was inevitable we’d run into them again.

“Sure enough, Joel and I tracked-down my Sportster. It was being ridden by two Morgan cousins with the same Morgan shoulders and jaws, and the same black eyes. They were no more than fourteen, not even enough hair on their faces to shave. They said it was the first time they ever did anything like that. I asked them whose payroll they were on and they said the Morgan brothers. I asked them which one and they said Jimmie.

“Jimmie tell y’all to steal my bike?” I asked them and they said yeah, so I asked them where they were from and they said, Gonzales. I asked them how long it’d take for them to fan back yonder and the littler one goes, ‘Sir, as quick as y’all’ll let us!’ I told them to get going and don’t ever come back, and I turned them loose. They stood there with their mouths gaping wide open, not believing their luck. Before they could take a step, Joel slung his gun and shot them both dead.”

I gasp. “They were just kids!”

“A Morgan’s a Morgan. Reckon it was an easy choice. Joel figured it was better to stay alive and that’s all there is to it.”

“He killed in cold blood,” I say.

“Joel ain’t a murderer. He never pulls a gun on an honest man. He’ll throw down on a man only if he’s gotta but he ain’t looking for the chance. He was only protecting what belonged to us from those who came to take it.” He scratches his chest hair and pets it. “Sure enough, them brothers paid us a visit and called us out. ‘We were wondering if y’all had the nerve to kill them Kirkland boys,’ Jimmie goes, so I go, ‘Well, y’all can stop wondering. We did it. We caught them with my bike and took matters into our own hands. Something else you’re wanting to know?’

“Yeah,’ he goes. ‘We came to tell you that you ain’t getting away with murder.’ I looked over at Joel and he was coiled tighter than a rattlesnake, poised and ready to strike. Like a crack of thunder, he shot Jimmie—a headshot. He was dead before he hit the ground. He turned to Dickie and told him to stop running his fool mouth, pick-up his dead brother, and get the hell offa our lawn. Dickie tried to get him to finish the job right then and there but Joel wasn’t taking the bait. ‘I’ll do my shooting when I’m good and ready,’ he says to Dickie, ‘and when I’m good and ready, I’mma let you know. How ‘bout that?’

“A couple days later, I pulled up to the house and there was an unsavory-looking character waiting for me on the front porch, grinning like a hyena. Ace Martin—the slickest gunslinger in all them...
parts. I’d heard of him, heard of his tricks—his death draw. He was a gun for hire and he ran with the Morgan gang. He came with the deliberate intent of sling ing his gun on Joel.

“I asked him if he was waiting for someone in particular and he said he might could be. ‘You’re taking interest in my business?’ he goes, so I go, ‘I might could be if your business concerns gunning for my brother,’ ‘What name does he go by?’ ‘He goes by his own—Joel Miller.’ ‘You might could be right,’ he goes, so I go, ‘I know I’m right and I’m telling you this. You’ve gotta get through me before you get through him.’ ‘You’re thinking I won’t?’ he goes, so I go, ‘Maybe you will and maybe you won’t but it’ll take some doing.’ ‘I reckon it will,’ he goes. ‘But it’ll get done. Just you and me.’

“I pulled up my gun and told him it ain’t coming off like that ‘cause I reckon there’s two of us—me and my gun. He flashed that hyena grin and said he was warned about the Miller brothers and their guns, and I’d never manage to pull the trigger before he fired-off the shot he needed to kill me. ‘You keep-on thinking that,’ I told him. ‘I will, Tommy, I sure will,’ he goes and swings-up a venomous-looking M1 carbine with a chopped barrel and a 30-round mag.

“Well, it ain’t ever gonna be said that Tommy Miller ran from any man who pulled a gun, but that there was a death-spreader!” He laughs. “Suddenly my own .357 felt like the smallest gun in the world in my hand. I figured I was a goner and didn’t even have time to say a little prayer. Just as he started pulling back the trigger, the living room window exploded in glass and his hand jerked back like it’d been yanked by an invisible force. His pistol flew to the ground and he stood there gaping with his stock shattered to bits.

“Another shot popped-off and his face went white as chalk. He started cursing. He grabbed his wrist and held up his hand. His trigger finger was shattered, hanging-off by a shred. It was Joel’s shot—he’d been watching us the whole time from the front window. It was some of the slickest shooting I’d ever seen in my life. He came kicking through the door, sneering that mean grin of his and his eyes blazing hell.”

“Why didn’t he just kill him?” I ask.

“He maimed him,” Tommy says. “Busted his hand wide open. He’d never pull a trigger with that finger again.”

“Think he lost his nerve?” I ask.

Tommy scoffs. “I reckon it looked too easy to kill him. There’ll always be men who’ll dare you to kill them. Taunting and mocking and defying you to kill them. Joel wasn’t gonna make a mess outta the whole deal so he let him off with a warning. He knew if he tried it again he’d shoot-off his other hand.

‘Looks like your shooting days don’t go no more,’ he goes to Ace. Ace started blubbering and pleading for his life, so Joel goes, ‘Lucky for you I ain’t in a killing mood today. I’mma give you a second chance. Go tell Dickie and the rest of them Morgans we’re gonna finish the trouble Jimmie started. He’ll be getting what’s coming to him. And make sure to tell him we’ve been looking forward to it.’

“Joel was dead-set on killing Dickie ‘n’ ‘em, hell-bent on making trouble. It ain’t his way to procrastinate. He likes to settle things right quick but I knew we had to be patient. He’s gone up against some of the toughest and meanest sons of bitches, and he never comes-out second-best, but them Morgans had their men watching every approach, trying to jump us. We needed an edge to come out ahead so we waited till one night when a thick fog rolled-up. We drove down to the Shallows and slaughtered the whole bloodline down to Original Sin.”
“All of them?” I ask.

“Chopped-down whatever was moving, whatever was still sucking air.”

“Women and children?”

“All cats look grey in the dark.”

“Who got Dickie?”

“I took the front door and Joel went around the back. I kicked through to a roar of gunfire. Everyone scattered and backed-up against the walls. I lost count, they came at me so quick. I don’t even remember firing-off shots, just saw them staggering and going down sideways. I figured luck was on our side that night. Most of them were drugged-up or just plain drunk.

“I kept throwing shots till I heard nothing but the blood pounding in my head and a ruckus coming from the bathroom. Dickie was there on the floor, slobbering and bleeding all over himself. He’d gotten shot-up pretty bad and was struggling to get up, grinning that crazy grin of a fighter whose will outlasts his strength. Joel was standing over him with that look of mean arrogance on his face. Dickie threw his gun on him and started pulling-back the trigger but his hand was shaking real bad. ‘I’m following my brother to Hell and I’m taking the Miller boys with me!’ he yelled with a mouth full of black blood. Joel twisted the gun from his hand and pistol-whipped him till his brains splattered the walls. Dickie died cursing the man who got him. Texas always gets ‘em! We lit-up the place and watched the flames catch hold. That was the end of the Morgan outfit.

“After that, Joel wanted out. ‘I’m getting away from this damned place and I’m never coming back. Don’t ever wanna have to kill another man and his kin like that ever again.’ I told him wherever he wanted to go, I’d back his play, so we hit the trail. Lit east. Fanned out yonder to Boston.”

“But you had the whole place to yourself,” I say. “No more Morgans.”

“Nothing much’s ever settled by killing. There comes a time in every man’s life when taking a life ain’t easy to swallow. It doesn’t go down and you can’t spit it up—it gets stuck in your craw.

“Texas Territory was rough in those days. A man had to be real tough. Rio Grande crossings were hell and border towns were worse. There was a steady flow of rustlers, smugglers, bandits, renegades, and outlaws cutting a path through Mexico, the gateway to the American territories. Gun-running was king. Smuggling contraband and drugs—opium, heroin—everything down to sotol. Revolutions were daily. Smugglers changed sides every night. Banding together, plotting rebellions, and killing each other over a shred of tobacco or a drop of pop-skull.

“In that kinda environment, Joel’s recklessness thrived. He didn’t hesitate to kill at the slightest provocation. Reckon he got sick of that foolishness, just wanted to go back to being an honest dependable man—till you cut across his trail, set him loose, and dragged him back into the thick of it.”
I play with Tommy’s chest hair. I tug at it and rake it with my fingers. I suppose hearing these things about Joel should please me. I’m not pleased. These stories take me further away from him, make me feel like he’s a stranger. If you heard the story of me and Joel drifting, you’d think we were the closest people on the face of the earth but I realize there are chasms between us. The distance between planets. Entire solar systems, even.

I thought I knew Joel better than anyone else in the world. I spent the last couple years of my life with him at my side every single day. Waking-up every morning, he was the first person I saw and the last person I saw every night at bed-down. He’s taken the place of a father in my heart. So who is he to me now? I have no idea. Could you imagine living your life every single day with someone at your side and not knowing the most basic things about them?

I suppose Joel doesn’t share these things with me because he doesn’t see me as an equal. It’s not about trust. I can’t be convinced it has anything to do with trust. Joel knows I can keep my mouth shut. He knows this. I suppose he resents me for all those years drifting. Dragging him out of the comforts of Boston after he found a nice place for himself and found a steady job on the black market with Tess. Drifting with me, he had to endure starvation, danger, and the discomforts of weather, and in the end, it was futile. He probably resents me for Tess’ death. I don’t blame him. I suppose he’s sorry he ever met me. I wonder if his evasiveness is his way of punishing me. It all feels very unfair. All day long drifting, he was like, ‘Ellie, do this,’ and ‘Ellie, don’t do that.’ Everything was about me first. He must’ve felt diminished. Trapped. Like I was an anchor dragging him down. I’m very confused about all of this so I ask Tommy what he thinks. “Do you think he’s sorry he met me?”

“I reckon if any man knows fate plays no favorites,” he says, “it’s him.”

“How’s that?”

“There’s no polite way to say it. Sarah was a mistake. They were just kids themselves. They didn’t know any better. Joel could’ve really been someone. He was smart at school and he didn’t have to study. I did and it went right out the other ear.

“I was there when he told our folks. They were good folks. They were good to us. They said nothing. They just sat there and said nothing. What could they say? Dad could’ve thrashed him for it, I reckon. Joel was your age. He wasn’t too big to be thrashed. The slightest thing, he took off that belt, but he always sided with Joel. Joel looked like his side of the family. If Joel did something wrong, he looked the other way. God forbid I made a mistake. No matter what I did, it wasn’t enough. Mama started crying.”

“Not tears of joy?” I ask.

“Not them kinda tears. Jess had no family, lived out yonder in a beat-up old trailer with a crazy old aunt twice removed and a drunk boyfriend. They both wanted marriage and wanted to keep the baby so Joel took to it like he always does, reliable and straight, never running away from nothing—it’s not consistent with his code. He worked as many hours as he could and saved every penny.
“He made a good husband and he loved Jess but when Sarah came along, she couldn’t square with being tied down to someone else’s schedule and she put him through hell figuring it out. That was hard medicine to swallow. She dodged responsibility and couldn’t adapt. Fights left him broken for days.

“She remarried right quick, before the ink even dried on the divorce papers. Reid Larrabee—a con man and a gambler. He was all bad, not a bit of good in him. His uncle left him a car dealership in Plano with a good reputation but he sold it and opened a Las Vegas-style gambling den in Grapevine. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and good looking with an easy smile and grey eyes, the color of ice. I suppose he gave Jess a nice reason to wear all them pretty little things she shoved to the back of her closet once Sarah came along. I didn’t even know they’d gotten hitched till Dickie Morgan pulled up next to me at the gas station and tossed a copy of The Statesman into the back of my pick-up before peeling-out. He’d circled their wedding announcement. Always wanting to make himself the bearer of bad news and ugly rumors.

“A couple years later while I was in Dallas on business, the sky opened-up and a heavy rain started coming-down sideways. I ducked into a church to wait it out and there she was, sitting in a back pew.”

“Jess?” I ask.

“She’d gone to blazes. She had a gorgeous head of blond hair that shone like gold but it’d gone half-grey. I’d never seen anyone looking so shabby in my life. Everything scuffed and dirty, deep lines around her mouth, and dark shadows under her eyes. She needed some feeding-up, a couple of home-cooked meals, but she still had that proud look to the way she held herself.

“After what she put Joel and Sarah through, I never thought I’d feel an ounce of pity for her. She threw herself at me, laid her head on my shoulder, and had a good cry. The least I could do was buy her a hot meal. She told me she was in big trouble. Reid was in prison, and she was homeless and worse than broke. She threw herself at my mercy. I didn’t know that sonofabitch had gotten himself locked-up. He went bankrupt from unpaid gambling debts and fell afoul of the mafia in Galveston. When he wasn’t running from the mob, he was running from the law. Money laundering and larceny. He’d been stalking rival gambling dens, trailing fellow gamblers and mugging them after big wins, till one night, one of them shot back. They arrested him at the hospital, patched him up, and threw him in jail. I found out later he stole my identity, opened-up a suite of credit cards, and forged my name on a whole stack of checks, free as you please. If he’d been alive in them Old West days, he would’ve been a thug among desperados, murderers, cattle rustlers, and highwaymen. Drifting along, and killing and robbing folks blind.

“At the time, I didn’t know any of them things and I’m not sure I would’ve cared. All I knew was the mother of my brother’s child was in big trouble and I wanted to help. Sarah would never dare ask Joel but she asked me all the time. ‘When’s my mom coming back?’ She can’t come back now, I’d tell her. We’ll meet her again, honey.” He sighs deep. "I set-up Jess in a nice studio, signed the contract, paid her rent, and loaned her some money.”

“Did Joel know?” I ask.

“He was so bewildered and hurt over the whole thing, he’d be too bitter to even let me think about it. Looking back, I reckon I did it to make myself feel good inside. Part of me wanted her to think, There goes the biggest man I’ve ever known. I wanted her to realize she made the biggest mistake of her life walking out on Joel but it was a damn foolish notion. A good hand never wins against a pack of dirty deuces.

“Things stayed quiet for a couple months till no one could get a hold of her. A week turned into a
month. Seems she’d taken every last penny I gave her and gotten Larrabee paroled outta Huntsville Unit penitentiary. They lit outta Texas Territory and no one ever heard from her again.”

My heart knifes. I can’t believe what she put them through. She abandoned them. She was cruel to Joel. She denied him love and respect. She was cruel to their daughter. Their own daughter! She knew what it was like to be without parents yet she still abandoned them. I understand exactly how Sarah must’ve felt. Her own mother gave her up. How could a mother do that? How could she give up her own child? Maybe Joel didn’t tell me these things because he didn’t want to remind me of my own mother abandoning me. Or he didn’t want to badmouth her every time he mentioned her. How couldn’t he?

“She played us for fools,” he says.

“She just disappeared,” I say.

“That was her way. Like a ghost. She walked-out on him the same way. He came home from work one night and she was gone. She’d taken everything, even her winter clothes, the stuff she’d kept stored away. The only thing she left behind was her car and Sarah. Imagine a mother doing that to her own child. To her husband. Joel had no choice but to let her go.”

I try to make sense of this. Everyone pictures their wedding day and married life but no one ever thinks about getting unmarried. Creating a new way of life as a single parent. Joel must’ve felt like such a failure. Lonely, guilty, and inadequate. Hurt, angry, and isolated. He had to shoulder everything alone. If Sarah got sick in the middle of the night, he had to make all the decisions and arrangements himself. No one else to lean on, no one to comfort him, and no one to share the blame when things went wrong. His confidence and self-esteem must’ve been demolished. Sarah must’ve felt like me—confused, cheated, slighted, and unloved by her mother. I’m sure she asked him every single day, ‘Why do we live here without Mommy anymore?’ How could he explain it to her?

Maybe Jess couldn’t face being a mother. Maybe she needed to find out who she was. I try to understand this, being around the same age she was. I try to understand what it must’ve felt like to be tied down to something like a child that needs constant care and being slowly suffocated by it. Carrying something around inside you for nine months, and then having to confront it so suddenly and aggressively. Something no longer a part of you that loudly and incessantly demands care from you. Your body empty and depleted. Joel must’ve thought she hated him or that he was truly unlovable. I can’t imagine entwining your life around someone like that—giving yourself over to someone so completely in marriage and children—and then just disappearing.

Now I understand why Joel never talks about her. He must’ve wanted to forget she even existed. As a single dad, he couldn’t just move away, take a big trip, throw himself into dating, or even withdraw into himself. He had to stay strong and present for his daughter. Tied to the same places and routines that marked his married life for the sake of stability. No matter how hellish his responsibilities are, he was chained to them like he’s chained to me. He must resent me, too. “Do you think Joel resents me?” I ask. “Like a burden he’s gotta bear?”

“No man could ever say he’s laid down on the job, yeah?” he says. “He’s always gonna do the right thing so he can call himself an honorable man when he lays down his head at night. No power on this earth could force him to change. That’d be like trying to change a tornado.”

You’ve gotta take people as you find them, I realize. No one really changes in life. You can’t change people, only the world you live in.

“He’s travelled far and hard,” he says, “and he broke a lotta necks to get here. There’s been a lotta
blood spilled on that trail.

“After years of honest living, he’s still trying to live down his past and make good on his debts, protecting his nearest and dearest, and keeping them safe from harm. He’s got his pride, and for a man like that, it’s more important than life itself. A man’s gotta live with his conscience and his reputation, yeah? It’s been over thirty years but the earth’s still fresh on them graves.”
I wake on Monday morning to heavy rain against the powerhouse windows. Rain’s a huge pain in the ass for chores but I don’t care. My mood’s buoyant. I’m still glowing from Saturday afternoon with Tommy. I feel like I’m walking on air.

At the Ark, drenched livestock huddle close in the muddy hollows, squawking and howling. Langley knocks-down my tasks to the essentials and dismisses me early. With two hours to kill before lunch, I’ll go visit Joel in the infirmary. I still haven’t told him about swimming and I can’t wait to see his reaction. After hearing from Tommy about what he’s gone through, I’ve softened greatly toward him. I wish I could give him a big hug but Joel won’t tolerate being hugged by anyone, not even me.

When I get to the infirmary, I find his cell empty. No Joel. His bed’s been stripped and his stuff’s gone. A great sense of relief washes over me. Things’ll finally start getting back to normal now that he’s back at Delta, I think to myself.

I check the room for Gold to get the scoop on his discharge. No Gold. He’s not here. I don’t see Eve, either. I try the door of the operating theater and find it locked. They must be in there for a procedure. On my way out, I pass Grat, pale and flat in a bunk. He flags his hand and begs me for water. I’m in a hurry to see Joel but I stop. I do this out of respect for Gold. I don’t like Grat. I don’t want to even look at him. I pour him a mug of boiled water and hand it to him. I suppose I may as well ask him what he knows about Joel. “Gold’s in surgery?” I ask.

“Payson’s boil,” he says. “Big as an apple.”

“Do you know how long?”

“Been a while.”

“Eve’s in there?” Even saying her name makes me feel sick and cold with hatred. Why? She never really hurt me. She never really did anything but threaten me. I suppose it’s enough.

“Haven’t seen Blondie,” he says.

I glance impatiently in the direction of the door. Time to go. He must sense my impatience because he pats his mattress and says, “Don’t rush off. Come sit on my bunk. The price’s a kiss.” He smiles wide. His lips are flaky and chapped.

“Have you seen Tex?” I ask, meaning Joel.

“I could really use a kiss.” He licks his lips.

I imagine kissing his chapped lips and his big horsey mouth with his big horsey teeth and it makes me sick. I think of his dirty hands on me and I almost retch. Grat spends his whole life shoveling horse shit. He must love it because anyone who didn’t love it would never do it. You could tell him it’s disgusting but he wouldn’t understand. It’s his whole world. It’s what makes him happy. I guess life’s like that. Some people are just perfectly happy to shovel shit for a living. I wonder what he’d do if he woke up one day and horses no longer existed. I suppose he’d find another big
He slurps from his mug. “Looking for your pa?”

“Do you know where Tex is or not?” See, this is what kills me about living out here. In Boston, if you needed something, you asked someone directly and they either answered you with a grunt, a rude gesture, or they told you to fuck off. Here it’s a three-act play. Act One: you wait around for an answer while things are mulled over. Act Two: your question’s questioned, followed by filler about weather, health, and crops. Act Three: you’re given irrelevant backstory about your question and then maybe you get an answer if you’re lucky. At first I thought everyone had an odd sense of humor out here but I’ve come to realize no one’s got one at all. There’s nothing to laugh about out here. I thought maybe they were just distrustful of strangers, like they were being evasive, but now I realize it’s because they have all the time in the world to play these games.

“He’s your pa as much as Scroggins’ mine,” he says. “Those who raised you’s kin. Every man’s a reflection of the company he keeps.”

“You live with horses,” I say.

“No man in this world hasn’t benefited from consorting with animals. I’m at my happiest when I’m around them. Wannna know why? It takes three little things to make them happy: eating, sleeping, and fucking. Give them extra ideas, and they start kicking and screaming like the Devil. Ever notice when folks start making a fuss? It’s ‘cause they’ve got too many choices. You’re never gonna catch no animal falling for crazy ideas. Hell, I’d rather be around a skunk than most of ‘em —”

I’ve reached my limit. I start cutting toward the door. He calls at my back, “Anytime you’re fed-up with folks, come and sit with me and the horses! We won’t mind!”

I head to Delta and I find myself rushing. I don’t know why I’m rushing. I feel panicked. Why should I feel panicked? No reason at all. Maybe it’s because Joel’s back at Delta and so much has changed since he’s been in the infirmary. I hope things aren’t strange between us. I hope things don’t feel weird. He never mentioned to me when he was supposed to go back to the dorms. Neither did Gold. Why should he? No reason he should’ve told me, I suppose.

I get to Joel’s cell and find the bed sheet drawn over the entrance, which means he’s sleeping or he wants privacy. Normally I’d knock or shout his name or come back later but I’m too excited to wait, so I swipe it aside.

For a second, I think I’ve gone to the wrong cell. It doesn’t look like Joel’s cell. His stuff isn’t here. His bunk’s stripped down to the mattress. But I know I went to the right cell. I went to Joel’s cell. I know this is his cell. I could find it with my eyes closed.


“I reckon that’s my own damn business,” he says.

“Where’s Joel?”

“What do you want with him?”

“I need to see him.”
“What for?”

“That doesn’t concern you.”

Burke shouldn’t be here. Joel should be here. In his cell. He should be here. Wasn’t he just in the infirmary? Wasn’t he there yesterday? Last night, even? He’s gone but how could he be gone? Where could he have gone to?

A voice at my back shouts my name—Gold’s voice—clipped and urgent. He stands in the cell doorway. He’s out of breath. He’s still wearing his dirty scrubs. He clearly came straight from surgery, I suppose looking for me.

“Where’s Joel?” I ask him.

He doesn’t respond, trying to catch his breath.

“Where is he?” I ask, a cold sweat breaking-out across my forehead.

“He’s gone.”

“Where?” I ask, my pulse hammering and my hands turning ice cold.

“I told you, he’s gone.”

“You did. Now tell me where he went and when he left.”

Burke laughs at me and gestures mockingly. “He shut you down!” he yells. “Scraped you off! Threw you out like the feral trash you are!”

The back of my neck flushes hot with anger.

“Now, don’t go blaming yourself,” Burke says. “He found another bitch and kicked you to the curb. Back on your knees, bitch! You ain’t daddy’s girl no more!”

I tremble, gasping past suffocating fury.

“The truth goes down real easy when it’s one-sided, don’t it?” he yells.

I lunge for him. I want to rip him apart with my bare hands. I hear Gold shouting my name and I feel his hands on me, dragging me away from Burke. He tosses me onto the bunk. I fight to rise and he pins me down to the mattress by my shoulders. “Enough!” he yells, menacing over me. “Enough!” He searches my face for a long moment. “He’s gone to the Vale. To live with her.”

“Drink,” Gold says. We sit facing each other on neighboring bunks at the back of the infirmary. He swirls whisky around his tumbler and gestures at my identical glass on the bedside table.

An ominous ritual. A cigarette or a drink customarily offered to the fatally wounded or someone sentenced to impending death. If I weren’t so shocked, I’d appreciate the irony.

I take a tiny sip and cough riotously as it burns my throat. I nervously finger my glass and gaze out
the fogged windows. Sheets of grim rain arrow the grey powerhouse fields. Mist curtains the mountains, shredded in ragged low clouds.

I feel Gold’s thoughts gathering up and he speaks. “You can’t imagine what it was like to be born into a world without fear or terror. Life as you knew it was gone in the blink of an eye, everything fallen into ruins. Not a single strand of hair, not a thread, not even a crumb was left behind. A lifetime was lost in a single moment. And the worst part—aside from the filth, the disease, the decay, the boredom, the endless waiting around for something to happen, and the absolute lack of coherence—was knowing it’ll never end. It’ll never go back to the way it was.

“Once you reach that point, you find little purpose or reason in doing anything. Nothing matters. Nothing matters at all. You stop processing strong emotions. They don’t proceed indefinitely. They stop and go no further. You no longer suffer wants or needs—love, sorrow, terror, pain, revenge—and you attach yourself to the nearest and least threatening thing present.

“Man’s greatest instinct’s shelter. Home. When his heart’s been emptied and he’s entirely alone without shelter, anything’ll do—a distraction, a ritual, a vice, a habit, a cause. Relief found in others. He’ll punch a hole into anything, claw his way in, and cling to it desperately. Do you understand?”

I don’t understand. I don’t understand anything at all. Nothing makes sense.

“To Joel, it’s not who she is,” he says, “but what she represents. He’s a man of moral defects. He’s incurably wounded. He suffers the weight of his failures. He can’t be with someone of great capacity. It takes too much effort, too much persuasion, and too much compromise.”

Eve’s everything I despise in a woman. Quarrelsome, meddlesome, scolding, condescending, capricious, and bossy. She’s hypnotized by her imagined beauty. She thinks every man should worship her and every woman should envy her. “I’m sorry for her,” I say, “and I’m sorry for who she is.”

“A woman like that throws herself at a man like him,” he says. “She’ll never let him out of her sight. An empty head to shape to her man’s tastes and needs. She’ll figure out everything he likes and do it for him faithfully. She’ll always be around, waiting on him, cooking his food, cleaning his house, raising his kids, running his errands, and washing his clothes.”

I don’t understand anything he’s saying. None of this makes sense. Joel’s not that type. “You know how we lived,” I say to my lap. Joel hates to be fussed over. He hates to be bossed around. He hates to be owned. He hates the monotony of relationships. I thought I knew him. We drifted together, fought together, starved together, and bled together. I never thought anything in this world could come between us but it’s happened. He’s left me behind. He left Delta, the Dale, and all that it meant to him. He left the independence he had here. He left me behind and all I meant to him. He went away from me to live with a complete stranger, one he barely knows, and one who I’ve heard him mock. Someone who’ll make him terribly unhappy. I know all of this but none of it makes sense. I’m full of terrible emptiness and confusion, and it frightens me.


I shake my head, no. “I know him. I know his true nature. He hates that kinda woman.”

He shrugs. “Cupid’s got poor aim. Or he’s simply gone blind. She’s been pursuing him since you arrived. Surely you’ve noticed.”
“She’s ruined everything. She should’ve known.”

“Should’ve known what?” he asks.

I don’t respond.

“Listen to me, Ellie,” he says, his voice disciplinary. “It’s perfectly acceptable—even encouraged—to spill a strategic cocktail down the vamp’s dress if she’s hooked her claws into your man but everything else crosses the line. Do you understand?”

“Why didn’t he tell me?” I ask. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“That hardly matters. A wound’s a wound, no matter when it comes.”

I swallow my tears. How could Joel be so cruel? How could he be so selfish? How could he be so different from who I thought he was? Out of the few people I’ve gotten close to in this world, how could he have done this to me? With his total disdain for women like her. For dating, for coupling-up, and for his aversion to being tied-down. I don’t understand.

The fact that Joel and I were together so long was an act of selfishness. It simply delayed my inevitable suffering. Sooner or later, we were bound to lose one another. Who goes and who gets left behind? Who will be the last of us?

Now that it’s happened, I feel liberated. I no longer fear separation. Nothing could be worse. Now I have to carry myself through life without him. I can be as wild, selfish, ungrateful, and dishonest as I want. Abandoned, dissolute, and irreclaimable.
It’s only been one week since Joel left but it feels like one year. I’ve been spending all my free time with Gold in the infirmary. He gave me extra chores to keep myself busy. Eve’s chores. She took a week off the day Joel disappeared, I suppose to settle into a new homemaking routine.

The first couple days after Joel left, I was too numb to process anything. I kept waiting for him to come back, not believing he was gone. I kept scanning the footpaths from the Vale, hoping to see him, watching from every window. After a couple days, I figured he’d send word with someone. Tommy or Maria. No word came. With every passing day, I figured he got too busy to reach out. Just like Joel. He got too busy with a big project Tommy put him on. That must be what happened. He’ll come find me when he’s done with it. He will. He’d better.

I kept telling myself to have faith in him. It’s totally like him to just up and leave like that. Joel and his strange moods. Well, it’s been a week and he hasn’t come back. I suppose he hasn’t come back because he doesn’t want to risk an argument with me. He’s scared to face me. Scared of my opposition. He knows I disapprove of Eve.

I should go down there and talk to him. But what would I hope to accomplish? Threaten and shame him into coming back against his own will? What’d be the point? It wouldn’t help me nor him. He’s fifty-years-old. He’s a grown man. It’s his decision to make, whether it was a mistake or not. He’s got a right to make his own mistakes. I can’t make those big decisions for him. He knows my opinion. He knows where I stand. I can’t add anything new to the conversation. If I go over there and confront him, I risk losing him for good, or risk losing the chance to help him if he realizes in hindsight he made a huge mistake. I know I should go there and say something like, ‘Well, Joel, good luck, be careful, and I’m here if you need me.’ His safety and well-being’s my first priority.

I obsess about him living together with Eve—in the same house, sleeping in the same bed, and eating at the same table. It fills me with a deep unsettling rage and dark brooding thoughts full of vindication. I wish horrible tragedies on her at my own hands or the hands of others. I want to burn her out of this world. I want to obliterate her till no part of her remains. Every day, the violent impulses grow stronger, wilder, louder, and more insistent. My heart’s full of hatred and malice. I know these thoughts of vengeance are wrong but I can’t think of anything else. His abandonment fills me with a deep complex malignant rage, nagging self-doubt, possessiveness, and pettiness. The trauma’s acute and inescapable. His betrayal, abandonment, and disloyalty cut deep. It’s left me with wounded injured vanity and a clear rival. Eve.

“Don’t forget the overhead light reflectors,” Gold calls through the open door. He sits right outside the operating suite at a rear table taking notes on Osgood’s surgery.

“I already did!” I reply. Osgood severed his thumb at the first knuckle while chopping wood. It was dangling-off by a piece of meat. It had to be amputated. Amputation’s one of Gold’s top procedures, often the quickest, easiest, and least painful treatment over extensive reconstructive surgery for liquefied bones, mangled muscles, suffocated flesh, and deep infections. Chop it off and let it heal.

I wipe-down the operating table and clean the instruments, basins, and trays. I add sterile bleached scraps of freshly-boiled linen to the big rolls we keep in screw-top glass jars. These linens are
precious. All scraps, no matter how big or small, are saved and washed after they’ve been used on wounds. I top-off a glass jar of crude pungent turpentine. We make it from the big old pines at the canyon’s edge, and use it over cleaned wounds as a barrier and an astringent.

Beyond the door, heavy heeled footsteps approach in purposeful strides. A mezzo voice calls Gold’s name in greeting—Eve’s voice. “Am I interrupting something?”

My stomach seizes and blood darkens my face. I hate you, I yell at her silently. I hate you more than I’ve hated anyone or anything in my whole life. Go away. Go away and never come back! I never want to see you or hear your voice again.

Gold’s chair scrapes over the floor. Body weight compresses in a muffled greeting. “I didn’t expect to see you today,” he says.

“All difference between today and tomorrow?” she asks.

“Not to me,” he says. “To you?”

“I’d some particular business to look after so I figured I’d stop-in and say hi.”

“I’d never complain about being missed,” he laughs. “Till tomorrow?”

“Actually,” she says. “I’d like to sit here and talk to you, if you don’t mind?”

“Not at all,” he says. A chair scrapes the linoleum as I picture him pulling it out for her to sit. “Make yourself comfortable. I’ll be right with you.”

I scowl at this. I suppose he’s going to come in here to lock-up Osgood’s patient file in the fireproof safe before he chats with her. Then he’s going to escort me out of the room so they can speak in private. So they can have their Little Secrets.

I wait for him to cross into the room and when he does, he looks at me directly and presses his pointer finger against his lips. The universal sign of silence. I nod my head, yes. Yes, Gold, I’ll be so quiet you won’t even know I’m in here. He’s giving me permission to eavesdrop. I’m overcome by a feeling of great warmth and affection for him. He’s a true friend, the only one I have left in this world. The only person I can confide in without judgement, pity, or condescension. He leaves the room and closes the door until it almost touches the door frame. I put my ear to the crack. I can’t see them but I can hear everything they’re saying.

“So what’s on your mind, Eve?” Gold asks her, followed by the sound of his chair scooting across the linoleum. Gold doesn’t care for her. I can hear it in his voice. It’s not the same tone he uses with me.

“I was wondering if you could help me get a line on something,” she says.

“I’ll do my best.”

“You won’t abuse no confidences?”

“None.”

“It’s about Culpepper. Has there been any chatter about him resigning?”

“As my assistant surgeon?” Gold asks.

“As deputy marshal.”
“Is there a problem with his conduct?”

“None of the sort.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“The way I see it, Culpepper’s got three positions of importance here. I reckon he wouldn’t mind letting one go. Now that Joel’s at the Vale, I reckon he’d benefit from a regular position. Deputy Marshal. Is there some way to make Culpepper’s job here interfere with the other?”

This is the dumbest proposition I’ve ever heard in my life. Joel as a lawman. A lawman! He doesn’t care about law and order. He’d rather let people sort out their own troubles themselves. He’s too aloof to be a lawman. He’d rather leave the dangerous stuff and drudgery to others.

“Isn’t that something Tommy should handle?” he asks.

“He’d rather not have Joel messing with the law,” she says. “He said back in Texas Territory, he ran a bit wild and doesn’t want his old habits getting to him. I reckon he’s worried Joel’ll backslide.”

“He doesn’t strike me as a backslider.”

“I suppose he’s got the wrong ideas about him,” she says. “I won’t have him turning into a good-for-nothing stray, low-down and mean. Ain’t fit for nothing but moping around or doing work that ain’t fit for any real man to do.”

“Give it some time. It’s only been a couple of months.”

She snorts. “Someone’s gotta step-up and make an heir to this place if Tommy and Maria ain’t gonna bother. Married ten years with nothing to show for it. That’s their idea, not mine. A friendship with your husband doesn’t count.”

“Is Joel on the same page?” Gold asks.

“Wouldn’t that be nice to know?” she asks facetiously. “He’s been making himself scarce. Him and Tommy have been fighting like trapped coyotes, walking around with faces that’d scare a vulture offa warm roadkill. Last night he snuck-off.”

“Snuck-off?” Gold asks.

“We had a disagreement,” she says.

“About what?”

“Nothing much. He gets into these moods, like he’s trying to repress something and he goes quiet. Something’s come over him. Tommy swears he hasn’t changed at all, says he’s the same Joel today as he was yesterday and a million years ago. He’s been sitting on the porch all week with Buckley, with his hand over his head, staring-off into the rain like he’s expecting someone. I swear I heard him talking to him like he was kin.

“Last night, I went to bring him his supper. He wouldn’t come in. He told me he wasn’t caring for nothing so I told him I’d leave it for him but he said not to bother, said to give it to Buckley. Give that flea-bitten mongrel the supper I’d slaved over! ‘Funny thing, ain’t it?’ I said to him. ‘The way that dog keeps a distance between me but not with you. Ever notice folks are like that?’ ‘Buckley don’t mean no harm,’ he goes. ‘I just reckon he doesn’t approve of you.’ ‘I beg your pardon?’ I go,
so he goes, ‘I suppose it’s just his disposition.’

“I set myself down and told him I wanted to talk straight with him. I asked him what it was that was taking him so far away from me. I told him he was growing less like the man Tommy always said he was. He kinda stiffened-up and goes, ‘And what kinda man’s that?’ so I told him all he had to do was take his rightful place in the world and we’d be proud of him, eager to catch step with him every step of the way. I told him he could be the king of creation out here if he wanted. All he’s gotta do is lay claim to it.

“Then I asked him what it was that was making him so unhappy. I’ve seen him lying awake at night like he was thinking of a far-away place, brooding on a big question. So I asked him what it was that was making him grieve ‘cause he wasn’t the man I thought he was, the man I heard folks loved. Well, none of that sat right with him ‘cause he got up and goes, ‘You don’t understand and it seems I can’t make you understand, either,’ and he walked-off, free as you please. I haven’t seen him since.”

“You haven’t seen Joel since last night?” he asks.

“Have you seen him?” she asks.

“I haven’t seen him.”

“You don’t think there’s someone else, do you?”

“Aside from Buckley?” he asks. He’s making a joke. They share a quiet laugh. “He doesn’t seem the type.”

“Suppose he’s been slinking-off on daddy duty?” she asks.

“Daddy duty?”

“Like he still feels responsible for her?”

“Ellie?” he asks, followed by a pause so I picture her nodding her head, yes. “She’s been keeping quiet,” he continues.

“I won’t stand for anyone else in the picture,” she says. “Not after Graham and his whore. I won’t go through that again.”

“Graham was your first husband?” he asks.

“My first love. We met in junior high, at church camp. We knew from the moment we met we were meant for each other. We got married and he rose to managing director with the status and the money to go with it. He got mighty ambitious for material things. Nothing I did at home could match those fancy dinners and trips on his company’s expense accounts. It made him totally uninterested in home life. I had to plead with him to help me do the smallest things around the house. He was always out evenings entertaining or he’d come home at midnight and expect to be fed. I hated entertaining his clients—it bored me to tears. I’d put up with it for a while till I put in the boot. We’d fight, things would settle down for a bit, and then the whole thing would start over again.

“He’d been acting strange for months, staying out late till, blaming it on new out-of-town clients. He’d come home, say he was exhausted and go straight to bed. It was like he stopped looking at me. We were living together in the same house but it was like he removed me from his field of vision. I’d ceased to exist.
“One night while he was showering, I found a text on his phone. From her. Nothing obvious but when two people have been together for a long time, there’s a natural rhythm, and when it gets broken, even in a small way, you feel it. I knew there was someone else so I asked him to his face. He didn’t answer me, just stared into his drink. When he finally fessed-up, he said he didn’t mean to hurt me but he was miserable. He felt lost. He looked at his future and he couldn’t take no more.

“He threw away his whole life for her. An intern, half his age. A home wrecker. She was the kinda girl who didn’t know right from wrong, didn’t care one way or another she was sleeping with a married man with a wife at home, the kinda girl who walks in sunshine and leaves storms behind her. I told him it’d never last but he said he was in love with her and planned on being in love with her for a long time. I told him to pack his things and go. He had a choice and he made it, traded me in for a newer model, and I wasn’t gonna be nobody’s second choice.

“A couple months later, I heard a knock at the door. It was late. It was him. He looked like he’d aged a decade. He asked me to come in so I let him in. He said it was over. She dumped him. He said he realized she was just playing with him, the kinda girl who did it just to prove she could get with a married man and break-up a family. It was all just a big game to her. He said in the end, he realized he just needed a best friend. He apologized, said he was a fool, and that I was the only woman for him. He said he wanted me back if I’d have him. It was the sweetest vindication I ever felt in my life but it didn’t last long. He went to get his things from the apartment he was renting and he never came back. It was the night of the Crack Up. Graham never came back. He never came back.”

A long silence follows until Gold breaks it. “You’ve been through a lot, Eve. I have no doubt you’ll get through this, too.”

“I just hope I wasn’t wrong about him,” she says, meaning Joel.

“Give it some time. If things don’t improve, let me know. Listen, I’ll fix you a brew-up—it should help with anxiety. Take it in the evenings, a couple hours after dinner.”

“I’m thanking you, Gold,” she says, her voice suffused with compassion.

“It’s nothing. I’m sure you’ll settle it between yourselves.”

“I’d appreciate if you didn’t mention this to anyone. I wouldn’t want Joel to know I was talking about him.”

“Not a word,” he says. “Though it might do you some good to have a chat with Ellie.”

She makes no answer I can hear so I figure she makes a distasteful face.

“She knows him better than anyone else,” he continues.

“Not a ghost of a chance,” she says.

“Why not?”

“We’ve never gotten along well.”

“I’ve heard that.”

“She’s always pulling that high and mighty stuff with me, stuck-up and arrogant.”

“I think you’re presuming a lot about her.”
“I reckon she was somebody where she came from but out here, she’s ceased to be whatever she was. This ain’t Boston, you know.”
Low shredded clouds blanket the mountaintops. Lake runoff sluices the dam’s spillway bays. The whole world feels heavy and bruised with rain. I can’t even imagine a single place in the world where the sun is shining.

I sit alone in the empty mess with my untouched lunch bowl of crusted-over barley stew. It’s the eighth day since Joel left. I can’t sleep and I can’t eat. I can’t think clearly. It’s like when you have the flu and you feel detached from yourself and the world, like everything’s happening in a dream and you’re just being moved along. You have to go along with it because you’re too sick to fight against it. I figured I could sleep it all off. There are things in this world that can be slept-off. This isn’t one of them. I can’t leave this one behind on my pillow when I get up.

Part of the problem is I can’t sleep, though no one seems to be sleeping much these days. Yesterday, four Deltas went outside the wire to gauge the water levels at the lake’s feeder creeks and upstream inlets but only one returned, concussed and battered with a broken wrist after a steel-reinforced concrete bridge collapsed into the churning whitecaps. Deltas are nervous, watchful, and ill at ease. Guard duty’s been reduced to sentry in solitary two-hour patrols. Prowler duty searches the banks for the washed-up bodies, still missing.

The mess door heaves open and Eve gaits into the room, her boots crusted in mud. I spring to my feet, ready to leave. Leave or hold your ground, I tell myself. I want to leave because I don’t want to be in the same room as her but I don’t want her to think she can chase me off.

“Hold up!” she yells.

“Go away!” I yell. “I don’t have anything to say to you.”

“Well you ain’t running off without letting me have a word with you first.”

“I don’t care what you have to say. Get out!”

“I’ll leave when I’m damn good and ready.” She pulls out a chair at my table and sits. “Go on, set yourself down.” She gestures at the chair I was sitting in.

My blood boils with bitter savage vengeance. I’m dying for a physical confrontation with her, the only kind that’d bring vindication. I feel it coming and I embrace it eagerly.

She gazes out the windows. “Raining like a cow pissing on a flat rock.”

“Did you come for a reason?” I ask. “Because if so, let’s get it over with. Say what you came to say.”

“Shouldn’t you be in class?”

“That’s none of your fucking business.”

“Don’t you back talk me!”

“I’ll talk to you however I fucking want!”
“I reckon you’ll change your tone once we’re kin.” She makes an enigmatic half-smile. “Reckon Joel wouldn’t approve of you back talking his wife.”

Blood drains from my face and my lips part soundlessly. It takes a long time for me to understand anything she said. She’s lying. It’s a lie. It must be an elaborate prank. Joel’s going to come storming through the door any second now and be like, ‘Surprise, Ellie! You should’ve seen the look on your face! I can’t believe you fell for it!’ I know Joel. He’d never marry her. Never. She’d never marry him, either. No one here’s good enough for her, not even Joel. She’s the type that’d only marry the supreme ruler of the world. The king of the whole territory. Someone like Tommy but he doesn’t want her. She wouldn’t settle for anything less and Joel would never oblige her. Joel’s old and sad and miserable. It makes no sense. These are rational thoughts I have but what she said isn’t part of that. Them marrying is my biggest fear. Why would she lie about that?

It all hits me at once. They’re getting married. Marriage. Him and her. I tug at my t-shirt collar, feeling an overwhelming sense of suffocation. I’m such an idiot. I can’t believe I didn’t see it coming. The fights she said they had. The heir she wants to sire. That pleasant look on Joel’s face in the infirmary when she was reading to him. My mind keeps going back to the two of them sitting on his bed. It always troubled me then and it troubles me now. I can’t believe I didn’t see it sooner. It’s the whole reason he moved-in with her. To start a new life together. Why do you think he went to live with her, you idiot, I yell silently to myself. Fact is, I never took it that far. I was in shock. I only thought about how hurt and abandoned I felt. My thoughts went no further than that.

“You’re lying,” I say, hoping she’ll correct me. I don’t like calling people liars. I believe people when they tell me things. Why shouldn’t I? Everything in this world is possible. Why should I argue the truth of something or not?

She laughs, low and disdainful. I don’t like the sound of this laugh. It chills me to the bone. “You know I ain’t the type to say things I don’t mean,” she says.

“You and Joel?” I ask.

“Was that what I said?”

“That’s what you said.”

“Then I suppose I must’ve meant it.”

Can she see the hurt in my eyes? I couldn’t hide it if I tried.

“Calculating a September wedding,” she continues. “If you believe the words of a liar.”

“He’s marrying you?” I ask, my voice soft.

“That’s the way the wind blows.”

A September wedding. She said that. She actually said that. Joel will regret it till the day he dies. I know he doesn’t have love for her in his heart. How could he? He can’t do it. He can’t. She can’t be serious. This is one of the worst things I’ve ever heard in my life. I have to pretend this is normal, not like it’s a perversion of all that’s right, good, and decent in this world.

“Now, listen here,” she says. “It’s perfectly normal for a teenage girl to fall harmlessly in love with an attractive older man but he’s mine now. You were getting too old to always be hanging around him. He had every right, just like you have every right to look around, and get out and mix. You’ll get over it. Get rid of everything he’s ever given you and anything that makes you think of him. Throw it in the lake or bury it in the woods. You’ve lost nothing. Get yourself a new haircut.
Scrounge-up something new from the cast-off bins. Learn a new skill. Redecorate your bunk. Throw yourself into something new. Time to start making new memories with someone else, someone closer to your age who’ll understand you better. Once you know what you want, all you have to do is find him. Pick-out one of them Deltas and settle down.”

“Are you telling me what I should do with my time?” I ask, incredulously.

“I am,” she says. She’s very pleased with herself.

“What I do with myself is my own business,” I say. “And what Joel does with himself is his own. I’ll see him as often as I like and you can’t stop me.”


“Save your warnings,” I say. “I found someone else.”

“A love interest?” she asks, her eyes widening.

I’ve got her good. How easy was that, I ask myself. “Someone I like,” I say.

“A Delta?” she asks.

“Grat,” I say. I almost wince after saying this. I’d never have Grat in a million years. No one in their right mind would. He’s the first name that sprang to my mind and I immediately regret the decision because it’s so unbelievable.

“Horse Grat?” she sneers.

I nod my head, yes, doubling-down on the lie.

“Scroggins’ boy?” she asks.

“Him.”

“No one’s interested in him! Look at him. No woman wants a loser.”

“I do.”

She laughs and a hard look settles on her face. “Now listen here. I’ve lived with men my whole life. You don’t know the first thing about waiting on a man, bringing him his slippers, or setting the table with his kind of food. By the time a young woman turns sixteen, she should know how to please or not please her man, keep the house clean, cook a fine meal, and do a good job of raising his kids. Do you know what to do when he’s feeling down? Drunk as a skunk? Beaten-up in a fight or wanting to get into one? You ain’t the type of woman for any type of man. You don’t mix!”

I take a moment and think about this. She’s right. I don’t mix. It’s because I’m different and not just because I’m a foreigner. I’m different. I say this to myself and something resonates deep, deep inside me. I’m different because I walk around with a secret weapon. I’m contaminated. A lethal pathogen courses my blood. I have a hidden weapon at my disposal and I don’t have to ask anyone’s permission to use it. Adrenaline lightens my limbs. I understand with supreme clarity what I have to do now. It’s actually quite simple. I start picturing myself as one of those mythical creatures—half spirit, half demon, half air, and half shadow. A sprite who makes trouble, pulling all kinds of pranks. Making enemies happy and scorning lovers, and prying into other people’s affairs. I draw down my mouth, and lace and unlace my fingers. “It’s not my fault,” I say, trembling my voice. “I never had a boyfriend.”
She laughs derisively. “Men are simple creatures. All you gotta do is make them feel like the strongest smartest handsomest man in the world. Make him feel like he’s the most amazing wonderful man that ever lived. Worship him and everything he does. Tell him he’s perfect even if he ain’t. Men love a helpless woman. It makes them feel superior. A big chest and a little brain doesn’t hurt, either.”

“I’ll bet you’ve had a ton of boyfriends.”

“My daddy kept a list to keep them all straight. I had half-a-dozen engagements and marriage proposals at a time.”

“I’ll bet you’re a good kisser.”

“No complaints yet.”

“I’m terrible at it.”

“It’s not hard.”

“Would you teach me?”

“Put your lips together and move them around.”

“Could you show me?” I ask timidly.

Her face flattens and color rises her cheeks. “Are you outta your goddamn mind?” she yells. “Not a chance in hell!”

Listen, the thought of kissing Eve is nauseating. I don’t even want to be in the same room as her. I don’t even want to touch her lips with a ten-foot pole. There’s no other way. If this is the only way, why shouldn’t I take it? I force tears to my eyes and quaver my voice. “I was raised an orphan,” I say. “I don’t know anything about men. I never had anyone to talk to about those kinds of things.”

“Bless your heart,” she says and smiles scornfully.

I heave a dramatic sob.

“Easy now,” she says, “no one’s hurting you.” She sweeps her hair past her shoulders and lays her hands flat on the table. “Now let’s get to an understanding here, yeah? I might could show you if you do something for me. But it’s gotta be our secret, just between us.”

I look at her directly, making no effort to wipe-away my tears.

“Promise you’ll keep quiet?” she asks.

I nod my head, yes.

“If you show it in some way, there’ll be hell to pay.”

“I promise.”

She gazes out the window and bites the insides of her lips. “Do you ever feel like there’s some sorta coldness in Joel’s manner? Something that holds you off?”

“Like how?”
“Like he puts up a barrier.”

“There’s no mystery to Joel. Joel’s Joel.” This is a lie. Joel’s a total mystery. He’s impossible to anticipate. He’s not a big talker and he’ll never let you know if he’s on your side or not.

“You ain’t answering my question,” she says.

“He doesn’t hide things. If he’s friendly with you, he’s your friend. If he doesn’t like you, you’ll know without a doubt. There’s no middle ground.”

She blinks back a look of agony and exhales one long breath.

“Something’s the matter?” I ask.

She shrugs. “Sometimes living’s like making a bargain. You can’t expect folks to do more than their fair share. Some folks can’t make an even trade. The thing is, I share everything with him but he doesn’t tell me a damn thing. Nothing about his ex-wife, his daughter, his folks. I don’t even know why or when y’all left Boston, how y’all met, or what happened between here and there. All them scars he’s got. That doesn’t sit right with me. I’m aiming to find out all them things and you’re gonna help me.”

“You want me to talk about him?” I ask.

“That’s right.”

“Ask him yourself.”

“I do. All the time. He doesn’t talk to me the way he talks to you. You’d think y’all would’ve run outta things to talk about by now.”

“What do you wanna know?”

“The whole story. I’mma ask you things to ask him and it’s gotta be our secret. He can’t know anything about this.” She runs her cold hard eyes over me. “Do we have a deal?”

“Can we have that lesson first?”

“First you gotta answer me one thing. Who’s Tess?”

“Tess?” I ask, my heart knifing. Tess should be here with us. Tess would eat this silly bitch for breakfast, she would.

“Her,” she says. “Is she pretty? How old’s she? Where’s she from and where’s she at? Was she with y’all in Boston?”

Eve speaks about Tess like she’s still alive, which tells me she has no idea who she was, nor any part of her story. Make her jealous, I tell myself. She’ll never have Joel. I’ll see her dead before she has him.

“Spit it out!” she yells. “I ain’t asking to hear the sound of my own voice.”

“The North End’s split into five districts,” I say. "Tess runs three of them and just took down another by the time we left. By now, she’s probably running the whole place.”

“Black market dealings?” she asks.
“Smuggling.”

“Drug running?”

“Drugs, guns, liquor, tobacco, pills, oil, make-up, perfume, soap. Black marketing. Buying and selling.”

She thrusts her jaw forward. “Does he still talk about her?”

“He does,” I say. “He made a promise to her.”

“What kinda promise?” she asks, her manner suspicious.

“The day we left, he gave her his word he wouldn’t marry again.”

Her eyes shift in bursts, taking it all in.

I continue, “He said he’d remain her husband no matter how long he was gone.”

She doesn’t respond.

“She gave him her promise, too,” I say. “To stay his wife.”

She blanches and draws a hand across her chest. “He’s married? They’re married?”

“Was that what I said?” I ask, choking back a smile as I throw her words back at her.

Her lips straighten into a bloodless bitter line. “You said wife.”

“I suppose I did.”

She tosses her hair. “Well, what would it matter? They’re just words. He’s with me now. Boston’s on the other side of the world for all I care.”

“What if she comes here and finds you?” I ask. “Takes back what belongs to her?”

She smacks the table with the flat of her hand. “What’s wrong with you?”

“What if he decides to leave and go back to her?”

“Is that a threat?”

“They could never stay away from each other for very long.”

She looks out the window. She’s chilled to the core at the thought of Joel leaving her for Tess or Tess coming here to claim him.

“You were at their wedding?” she asks.

I nod my head, yes. This is a lie. Weddings don’t happen in Boston. No party, guests, rings, or vows. No wedding dresses, bridesmaids, flower girls, tiered cakes, flowers, rings, choirs, or organ music. What would’ve been the point? Committing to a short life of hardship and misery together. Dreams of building a happy future in a world with no future. Marriage is a life contract and no one’s life lasts very long.

Eve’s never lived in a QZ and Boston’s on the other side of the world. For all she knows, she probably thinks Bostonians are all fishermen and pilgrims. I could tell her babies are born with
lobster claws for hands and she’d probably believe me. She doesn’t know anything that goes on outside of these walls.

“Get to talking,” she says, her voice disciplinary.

“I wouldn’t wanna bore you with the details.”

“I wanna know everything.”

I think about this for a moment, imagining a wedding fit for Joel and Tess in the Boston QZ. This isn’t a nice thing to do. I don’t like thinking about these kinds of things. Joel marrying a dead woman who he loved. If Joel and Tess had actually been married, they would’ve never had a wedding. Joel would hate the idea of having one. He hates dancing. He hates parties. He hates the wastefulness of it all. He’d say something like, ‘No, Tess, I don’t wanna whole lotta strangers around, eating and drinking and making a fuss over us. It wouldn’t be good for me. If you wanna do such a damned foolish thing, go ahead and do it. I ain’t stopping you from doing it but count me outta such nonsense.’

Here I go. “It was the last weekend in May. The spring before we left. It’d been a warm wet April. Everything was in-bloom. Everyone was talking about their wedding for months before it happened. Practically the whole North End was invited. Everyone gave them their blessings. The priest’s wife sang a special psalm during the exchanging of the rings. Joel was smiling down at her on the altar. I’ve never seen that kind of smile on his face before and I haven’t seen him smile like that since.

“He gave her his mother’s old wedding band—it fit her perfectly, like it’d been made for her. When she walked into the hall, everyone gasped. No one had ever seen her in a dress before. She had it made-to-measure outta some old sailcloth. She looked like a model in one of those old catalogs. She had a veil made outta mosquito netting. No one had ever seen her in make-up—big dark eyes and super-shiny long dark hair, half done-up in waves. You could barely recognize Joel. His hair was slicked back with oil. He looked like a movie star. His face was scrubbed the cleanest and freshest I’d ever seen. He wore a blue suit and a white shirt with a collar. It fit him like he’d been born to wear it.

“That watch he wears? She gave it to him—it was her father’s. That’s why he never takes it off. He said when the sun came up the next day and shone on that watch, it shone on the happiest man in the world. If you ask him anything about that day, he says he doesn’t remember a thing except the promises he made to her, the most important things he’s ever said in his life.”

Her eyes flash black malice, her cheeks darken, and her jaw tightens and thrusts forward. She hates every moment of this but she won’t stop me because she’s a huge gossip. I don’t like playing this game with her. I hate talking about people, especially dead people, even made-up nonsense like this, but I’m pleased to see her so jealous.

“She took his legal name,” I say. “Mrs. Miller—Tess Miller. They had a huge party in South Boston on the beach, across from Castle Island. It started at sunset and lasted through the next morning. Everyone who was there said it was the best night they could ever remember and it’d be a long, long time till there’d be anything like it again. Everyone drank and danced and ate all night. They had a clambake with enough food to feed all of FEDRA if they wanted to. They made a deep layer of stones over the fire till it got red-hot, covered it with wet seaweed, and put everything on top. Then they threw-on more seaweed and let everything cook for a couple hours: cod, mackerel, clams, crab, lobster, oysters—”

“Are you their child?” she interrupts me. “Is Joel your real father?”
No, Joel’s not my real father, you idiot, I tell her silently. Anyone with two eyes could plainly see it. “What would it matter?” I ask.

She sighs and gazes out the windows, her mouth set grim. She looks miserable, like she’s about to cry. Cry as only an overripe widow who’s waited decades to find the right man and then finds herself betrayed by him. “Reckon I’ve had my own ideas about him,” she says. “Looks like most of them were wrong.” She pulls to her feet with a sense of urgency. “I’m thanking you for telling me them things.”

“Wait!” I yell. “Our lesson!”

She glances at the door. I’ll tackle her to the ground if she backs out of my end of the deal.

“Hustle over quick, before I change my mind,” she says.

I go to her, urging my muscles calm, not like they’re gathering-up in great anticipation. Not like my heart’s racing out of my chest. Not like my hands have gone cold and clammy.

“Listen here,” she says. “You keep this a secret. All of this. Don’t say anything about anything to nobody.”

“I won’t say a word.”

She takes my face in her hand. We look at each other. She’s not pretty. She has elements of beauty that fool you into thinking she’s pretty—curly blond hair, expressive red lips, and big blue eyes—but there’s nothing beautiful about her. Nothing fits together the right way. Up close her nose is a bit too long, her mouth’s a bit too pouty, and her eyes are a bit too close set.

“Lick your lips,” she says. “You want them good and wet. Now close your eyes.” She licks her lips and presses them against mine.

I take her face into my hand and gently suck on her lower lip. A split second of reason returns to me, holding me back from delivering the fatal bite. Don’t do this, I tell myself. You must not do this. You must not kill. You must not kill her. There are other ways of dealing with this. Don’t do this. But these thoughts are fleeting. They only last a second.

I draw her lip past my teeth and vice down fiercely. Something crunches. I taste her blood in my mouth, thick and metallic.

She squeals and shoves me backward. Eyes bright, she daubs her bloody lips with a trembling hand. “You bit me!” She draws the back of her hand across her bloody mouth and examines it. “What’d you do that for?” She storms from the room, her cowgirl boots clacking furiously down the hallway.

He’s mine, that’s why, I yell at her silently. Joel belongs to me. Not to you. To me. Joel belongs to me.
Chapter Thirty-Seven

Oh, God, what have I done?

After a moment, the weight of everything hits me hard. Blood rushes into my face and quickly drains away, leaving me pale and my upper lip beaded in cold sweat. I wipe it away and find my hands are cold, clammy, and trembling. My breath comes fast and my heart pounds my throat dry.

Listen, I’ve killed people before. This isn’t something new. I never killed unless I was directly threatened of being killed myself. I’ve killed out of self-defense. I’ve always killed with a conscience. This is something entirely different. The conditions are different. I killed in passion. Plain murder. Cold blood.

It doesn’t matter how I feel about it. Other people will be drawn into this. A great sense of tragedy’s tied into it all. What else could I do? I don’t care Eve’s going to die but I think about everyone else around her when they find out: Tommy, Joel, Maria, Gold. The whole settlement. They’ll know soon enough.

I realize I don’t have much time until it’s all figured out and they’ll come for me. Even if Eve doesn’t tell them what happened, they’ll figure it out. Of course they will. The fact is, you can get infected without being bitten. Spores, you know. You breathe-in spores and you can get infected. This is something that happens. Maybe you breathed in spores a couple years ago and it was sitting dormant in your system until some autoimmune virus kicked it into gear. No one really knows how it works. But they’ll see Eve was bitten. It can’t be hidden. Not where I bit her, right on the mouth. Even if she wanted to lie about how she got infected, she can’t hide the bite.

It seemed like such a simple solution. Killing someone without killing them outright. It was a very simple thing in my head. If I had to plunge-in a knife or choke her out with my bare hands, it would’ve been different. I don’t know if I could’ve gone through with it. But I did it. I know I acted impulsively. I didn’t think it all the way through, did I? What was I thinking? Oh, God. What have I done? I feel cold and miserable. I feel like crying but I can’t. There’s no time to cry. I want to feel pity for myself but there’s no time for pity. I was so full of a sense of victory and righteousness just a short while ago, and everything’s changed so quickly. It’s all happening so quickly. I didn’t mean to do it but I had no choice. She should’ve known to stay away from Joel. Didn’t she know? I suppose I’ll have to go away now. I’ll have to give-up the place I call home.

What do I do? Where do I go? Who do I go to?

I could run but then there’d be no more Joel. I’d lose him forever. This isn’t something I can let happen. I’d only run if I couldn’t face-up to what I did. But I can handle the consequences. I’m not a coward. I’m not weak. I have no problem confessing to what I did. I did it. It had to be done. Only someone who couldn’t confess to what they did would run away like a coward.

What am I going to do, I ask myself. Think and choose. Think and choose.

I can’t stay here and just wait for things to happen. They’ll come after me. What’ll I do? I know what to do. I’ll wait till things blow-over and I’ll ask for fair judgement. Surely anyone in my same position would’ve acted in the same way. When someone comes to take away the only thing you
hold of value in this world, you defend it till death. Anyone would’ve done the same thing, right? I tried to warn her and she wouldn’t listen. Maybe she wanted to die. Maybe she had a death wish. Anyone could see the logic of what I did. Surely they could. There’s law here and it’ll protect me. The law will judge me fairly.

I only have one ally left in the world. There’s only one person who I can talk to as a friend and a mentor, who knows me better than I know myself.

Gold.

I’ll tell him and see what he has to say. Even if he’s not on my side, he never lies to me. He never covers things up. He’d never lie to my face. He’s a doctor, not a moralist. So I go to find the only person I know who’ll help me.

I push through the infirmary doors and he sees it on my face. Trouble’s come to find me. He can tell from the look in my eyes and my manner something’s terribly wrong. He doesn’t speak. He takes me by the arm and hustles me into the operating theater so we can talk in private.

“What is it, Ellie?” he asks, breathless. “Tell me what happened.”

“Eve came to find me,” I say. “She’ll be dead soon.”

I tell him everything that happened. His breath comes quick and the color drains from his face as the whole story comes out. I’m surprised at how calm my voice and demeanor is. It’s like I’m telling him about the characters in one of his books I’ve just read. Did I even do it? I’m not sure. Something inside me did it. I felt it acutely. Time for revenge. Like someone was shouting in my ear, ‘Ellie, it’s time for revenge! Now or never!’ I couldn’t stop myself. Once you’re set on revenge, nothing can stop you from seeking it out.

Gold’s silent the entire time. Thinking, listening, and taking it all in. He doesn’t say, ‘What? What’d you just say?’ or, ‘You murderer! You monster!’ or anything to show he’s shocked. I suppose this was always a possibility in his head, me killing her in cold blood. My mouth as a lethal weapon.

“This is not good,” he says. This is the last thing he says calmly because shortly after that, it hits him hard and he becomes very alarmed. “You have no time!” he yells. “They’ll find out soon enough. They’ll know it was you and they’ll come for you. Pack your things and go!”

“I’m not going anywhere without seeing Joel first,” I say. I’m convinced I need to find him and tell him what happened. He’ll listen to me and side with me.

“Do you know what’ll happen to you if you stay here?” he asks.

“I know,” I say. “They’ll probably kill me.”

“They’ll kill you!” he yells. “You’ll be lucky if they send you away and let you walk free. They’ll turn on you. They’ll beat you till you’re half-dead and send you away to die of your wounds.”

“I don’t care,” I say. “There’s law here.” I’m a teenager, after all. What could they really do to a teenage girl?

“The law won’t judge in your favor!” he yells.

“If I die, I die. It was meant to be.”
“You’ve dragged Joel into it, too. He’ll have to pay the price for what you’ve done.”

My scalp lifts in fear and cold sweat prickles my brow. I know he’s right but it doesn’t make any sense. I realize for the first time, my life was partly bound up with his, too. He put so much stock into me, sacrificed so much for me, and I let him down. I only thought about myself and I put my needs first. No doubt he’ll be disappointed in me and horrified by what I’ve done. I feel like a failure. “He’s got nothing to do with this,” I say.

“He’s your guardian,” he says. “He’s responsible for you. He’ll have no say. No say at all. Maybe they’ll spare him. But if he doesn’t go of his own free will, he’ll be dragged out of here.”

“Then I’ll find him and warn him.”

“No. He wouldn’t be able to defend himself. If they can’t get to you, they’ll get to him. You can’t fight this. His punishment’ll differ from yours but you’ll share the punishment all the same.”

“It’s not right,” I say.

“Accept it.”

“I can’t. It’s not right.”

“Pack your things and go. You have no time. Listen to me, Ellie, you need to go now!”

“I’ll leave tomorrow. When it’s light.”

“There’s no time! Leave now. I’m begging you!”

My blood chills at his insistent dire manner. He knows this place a lot better than I do. He’s been here almost from the beginning. He’s resigned to the harsh punishment he figures I’m going to receive. He’s already gotten used to the idea of my absence. His eyes are cold and impersonal when he looks at me. I’ve lost him. His fidelity and loyalty will only go so far. I should’ve known. And now I know. He’s right. There’s nothing and nobody left for me here. I have no choice but to go far away from here. It’s for the best. I need to learn how to look after myself. Who’ll do it for me if it’s not myself? It’s time to learn how to take care of myself.

“Will you go?” he asks, his eyes pleading.

I nod my head, yes. “Yes.”

“Where will you go?”

“I’ll go back to Boston.” I’ll go there. Back to Massachusetts Territory. Boston never meant anything much to me. I suppose I was happy enough to live there. After I say it out loud, I have a sudden longing to go back there, and to be among the people and places where I grew-up. I’ll be happy to be back on the East Coast and see the ocean again. To go to a place where the days are measured by the tides, and by the fishermen and trawlers who hang out on the docks. Maybe I’ll sign up to be a trawler myself, now that I can swim. It’s hard work and a hard life. But you get out on the water and you stop caring about the stuff on the land. You forget your problems and the things that tie you down. I suppose that’d be very liberating. I’ll find some of my old classmates, and maybe they’ll help me get a good job and a carnet to one of the nicer quads where I can see the ocean from my window. Then I’ll move-on when I’m bored, when life starts to feel boring. Now that Joel’s no longer part of my plans, what’s to stop me from doing this? I can be whoever I want to be. I’ll be fine.
“Good,” Gold says. “Word spreads quickly around here. You won’t be safe in this territory until they forget, and these kinds of people have long memories. They have little to do with their lives but remember things. Go quickly and quietly. Go quietly and keep yourself hidden.”

Quick heavy riotous footfalls break into the infirmary. Big loud male voices call-out insistently for Gold. We look at each other with wide frightened eyes. Do they already know? Has word spread that quickly? He opens the utility closet and shoves me inside. He doesn’t have to tell me to keep absolutely quiet. Soon enough, they find him. Judging by their footsteps and their out-of-breath voices, I picture a trio of Deltas.

“Tommy sent for you,” a baritone voice says. I can hear the urgency and breathlessness in his voice.

“What’s the reason?” Gold asks, his voice calm.

“We weren’t given one.”

“Well, what’s the matter?” Gold asks.

“We don’t know,” another voice says. “We only know it’s of an emergency nature. Grab your kit and let’s go. You’re needed immediately. We’ll escort you to the Vale.”

“You’ll wait outside,” Gold says.

“We’ll wait right here.”

“You’ll put those guns away and you’ll wait outside,” Gold says with more authority in his voice than I’ve ever heard before. He means to have his way.

“You’re needed immediately,” the voice says, the tone resigned but commanding. “We’re out the gates in five.”

I hear their footsteps retreating. After a long moment, Gold comes to find me in the closet. He cuffs me by the shoulder and looks at me directly, his face etched in deep concern and pity. “You shouldn’t have done that,” he says. “Pack your things and go.”

“I’ll wait for you to come back,” I say. “Come with me.” It’s worth a shot.

“No. Time for you to go. I warned you and you didn’t listen.” He shoves me aside and pulls a duffel bag from a shelf behind me. He sets it on a counter and starts loading it up with surgical equipment. He pulls a pair of large surgical scissors from a drawer and hands it to me. “Take these,” he says. “It’s all I can spare.”

“I can’t take them,” I say, rebuffing him.

“You must. And God be with you.”

“I’m not going anywhere without Joel.”

“If you want to be beaten and exiled, fine, stay here. If you want Joel to pay for it, too, fine. It’s your choice. As long as you know what you’re up against.”

He tosses the surgical equipment with little care into his bag. I’ve never seen him so careless. He always treats everything he owns with great attention and respect. His hasty manner makes me realize how terrible everything’s become. I feel terrible. Truly wretched.
He hoists his bag over his shoulder and looks at me. His eyes are resigned. “If you don’t leave while I’m gone,” he says, “stay here till I get back. Keep the door locked tight. Don’t open it for anyone but me. Promise me that.”

“I promise.”
Chapter Thirty-Eight

When Joel and I drifted, every night without fail, he tasked bed-down. Sometimes he’d tell me to keep my boots laced tight, my pistol chambered, and leave my backpack strapped to my shoulders. Other times, he’d tell me to undress, air out my boots, and tuck my damp socks beneath my underwear to dry.

Tonight, I hear him deep in my gut. ‘Take nothing off. You need to be ready. Stay down, stay quiet, stay alert.’

I think about him and everything he taught me. The thing I truly admire about him is how he stands for solid principles, and if necessary, he’d die for them, even if the principles were wrong. He never lets things slide and never gives into threats. He doesn’t run from trouble. He confronts his problems head-on. With this in mind, I decided to stay—holed-up in the operating theater waiting for Gold to return.

I’ve made a big mess of things. I know this acutely. I don’t have to be reminded. I was too angry and jealous to think straight. So what should I’ve done? I know now, now that it’s too late. I should’ve gone down to the Vale and spoken to Joel. But why me, I think to myself. Why should it have been me? He knows where I am and he knows where to find me. He should’ve come for me. Still, I should’ve gone to him when I realized he wasn’t coming to find me. I should’ve defied him and asked him to his face what it was all about. ‘What the hell are you doing, Joel?’ I would’ve asked him. ‘You should be ashamed of yourself, running off and leaving me behind for her. Who the hell do you think you are?’ It’s what I should’ve done but now it’s too late.

I don’t know what’s to become of me. What I hope is that Gold takes Joel aside and tells him where I am, and he comes to find me. Would he come with me back to Boston? Or would he rather stay here and face the consequences of the mess I made? I hope he comes to find me and we’ll break out of here together. If not, I’ll go it alone. The one thing I insist on is seeing him and talking to him first. I have to say goodbye. I have to explain my side of things. I want him to understand what I did and why I did it.

The thought of going back to Boston doesn’t depress me. I’m sure nothing’s changed but it’s bound to feel a lot different to me now. Better, I guess. I’ll be able to understand so many things I didn’t understand before.

I knew in my gut Jackson wouldn’t last forever. I knew we’d be leaving soon. Something told me not to get too comfortable here. In fact, now that I’ve made-up my mind about everything, I feel so much better. I’m resolved. I’m glad to have made a decision. I have a rough plan and it’s good enough. I’ll take every day as it comes. I already drifted from Boston to Wyoming Territory with Joel so I’ll just do the journey in reverse. How hard could it be?

I hear a faint sound outside the door. My pulse pounds my throat dry. I press my ear against the door and hold my breath. Strident footfalls. The cadence is wild. I picture a large man tearing into the infirmary and stumbling to a halt. Maybe it’s Gold? Would Gold run like that with no sense of stealth? I don’t know. Maybe he’s being chased? It couldn’t be Joel. Joel would never make himself known with such careless heavy footsteps. Joel approaches like a black cat.
A booming baritone yells in a low serious tone. The words come out rushed. Mattresses creak beneath shifting bodies from the handful of infirmary patients lying in their bunks. The words are muffled through the door so I open it a tiny crack to listen. “Emergency evacuation!” a deep male voice yells.

What, I ask myself. What’s this? What’s this all about? I’m hearing these words but they’re not making sense. Emergency evacuation?

“The river’s coming down!” the voice yells. “The spillways are failing! The dam’s breached! Evacuate north! Head inland! Leave now! All gates are open. Take only what you can carry! This is not a drill! This is not a drill!”

I tell myself it’s a decoy to lure me out of the operating theater but then I remember no one knows I’m holed-up here but Gold. He may disagree with what I’ve done but he keeps his mouth shut. He wouldn’t have told anyone my whereabouts. Still, I wait. I wait until the infirmary goes quiet and I wait a bit longer. Every muscle tenses with the understanding that if it’s not a bluff, I need to get the hell out of here before the river comes down. Now, I yell at myself. Go now!

I open the door and peer into the infirmary. Vacant. Evacuated. No one’s here. Bed sheets lay in disarray, ripped from the bunks by fleeing patients. Muddy boot prints stamp the floor. IV poles lay haphazardly across the aisle. Beyond the door, the hallway echoes with distant muffled thuds, excitable shouts, and stampeding boot steps. The dorms are evacuating. From the windows comes the sound of rushing tumbling water. I walk over and look out. My forehead breaks-out in a cold sweat. Lake overflow violently sluices the chute spillways and billows the river in bubbling frothing whitecaps. Anyone could see the dam’s not going to hold.

I’ve got to go. Now! I rush toward the door. Right before I reach it, I come to a skidding halt. I gasp and fall back a couple steps, my eyes wide in terror. A dark form stands in the doorway, blocking my exit. It’s Maria, dripping water and covered in mud. She targets my chest with her .45 pistol, her rain-soaked clothes plastered to her sinewy body and her wet hair flattened against her head. Her eyes are wild. She’s out of breath like she’s been running fast. Her face is grim and impassable. She takes a couple steps forward and squares in front of me.

“I hated you since the first time I laid eyes on you,” she says, her voice hoarse with rage. “Didn’t wanna let you in—had no choice—Tommy’s fucking kin. I always knew there was something evil about you and now I know. Every evil thing that’s happened here you brought to our door. You brought trouble to this peaceful place.”

I flag my hands. “Maria, please! Don’t!”

“You had it coming and you know you had it coming! Own up, now! You think I’m blind? Think I couldn’t see he was stuck on you? You filled his head with notions! This is the way it’s done—justice for those who break the law!” She squints down a brass check and pulls the slide rearward. “I ain’t letting no snake bite and get away with it!”

I stiffen and anticipate a swift end. I draw a deep shuddering breath.

Pack! Pack! Pack! My whole body jerks, expecting to feel the cold steel of her bullets ripping into my chest. It doesn’t come. Her shoulder bursts visceral and she folds to the floor in a loose heap. She’s been shot from behind. Someone cut her down before she could shoot me.

A dark form rushes into the room. Is that…Gold? It’s Gold!

“Are you hurt?” he yells. He holds a .357 revolver in his trembling hand. His clothes are soaked to
his frame and dripping water onto the floor. His chest rises and falls like he’s been running fast. He looks at Maria’s body and says, “Ellie, what have you done?”

I’ve wiped-out the Carters from the face of the earth, is what I’ve done. I wrench Maria’s pistol from her hand and shove it to four o’clock carry. Better in my hand than hers. No Joel. He hasn’t come. So be it. No time to think about this. I’ll have to go it alone.

Gold grabs me by the arm. “The dam’s not gonna hold! You have no idea what water can do!” He shoves me toward the door. We stream blindly into the dark hallway and come to an abrupt halt. A group of Deltas greets us, blocking our escape with their guns raised to combat-ready. They mean to kill us. This is clear. They must know. They must all know. They’ve come so soon. I thought I’d have a fair shot at escaping. It’s all over now.

“Get back!” Gold yells. He stretches himself up full length, swings his revolver above his head, and fires a shot, the orange flash stabbing the darkness. Speer smashes his rifle stock into Gold’s shoulder, dropping him to his knees and bashing his skull with a sickening crack.

Burke grabs my arm and tows me into his chest. I rocket my knee into his groin and he bellows pain. I twist free and sprint down the hallway, heading for the back doors. Pack! Pack! Pack! Crisp lead kicks and steel cracks sharply. Rounds whine past my ears and thud the walls, dispelling concrete shrapnel. Spent brass tinkles the floor. Pack! Pack! Pack! Glass windows explode into shards. I barrel through the doors and crash into the night.

I sprint toward the timber and absorb into the woods. The Deltas chase me, their footfalls thundering at my back as they draw near. I rip down the muddy footpath toward a group of evacuating Taus and Zetas rushing in a long panicked sweep. I toss myself into the tangle of wet bodies, trying to camouflage myself against the umbrellas, wailing children, and swinging luggage. I push forward and dive from the footpath into a thick aspen cluster, sinking into the cold sludge. I lay in the cold mud and pray it camouflages me until the Deltas pass.

Lightning stabs the darkness and thunder cracks at its heels. I hear the Deltas’ rough commands, shouting my name. I picture them tracing their flashlights across the thickets, shining them into every evacuating face as they pass. I wait until the shouts and footfalls grow silent. I’m safe for now. I need to think about my next move.

My decision to go to Boston doesn’t seem so clear now that I’m back outside. I haven’t really fixed it all properly in my head. I’m losing confidence with every passing minute. I realize I hadn’t really thought the whole thing through. I haven’t really thought about what it means to drift alone. I think about leaving Joel forever and a terrible aching loneliness floods over me. I think of all the time we spent together here. Swimming lessons in the lake. Chats in his cell.

I’m going away now and leaving it all behind. I don’t see how I’ll find anything like this ever again. Nothing will ever be the same. I wish it were all just a bad dream and I could wake-up. This isn’t a dream. This is happening, I tell myself. This is happening and I made this happen, and now I have to live with the consequences. Just go. Just go and leave it all behind. To hell with it! Go, and land wherever you land.

A horrible realization washes over me. This is the first time I’ll ever be alone with my fear and loneliness. Joel was always there to carry it for me and protect me from it. I can’t travel nor live on my own. I’m not strong enough or smart enough. I’m a weak foolish immature girl. I’ll always need the protection of a guardian. Someone stronger, smarter, and older than me. I’ll always have to live in a protected environment if I want to live on my own. A QZ or a settlement.

If I leave without Joel, I’ll be leaving him behind forever. Forever’s a long time. There’s little hope
of ever seeing him again. Even if we both were to survive this and miraculously find each other again, the simple fact is he’s much older than me. How many more years does he have to live? He can’t outlive time itself. My heart sinks. A feeling of helplessness washes over me. Tears spring to my eyes. Don’t cry, I tell myself. If you start crying, you’ll lose your nerve and then everything’ll be a mess. I’m homesick for Joel and Jackson before I’ve even left.

One thing’s certain. I must find Joel. I’ll figure it all out after I see him. I’m very mixed-up about everything but I can’t go without saying goodbye to him first or telling him where I’m going. I feel like if I speak to him, he’ll see things my way and come with me. I need to find him. I won’t leave without letting him know I’m going back to Boston.

To go to the Vale to find him would be very dangerous. The Vale’s downriver. But this fact leaves my head as soon as it arrives because I’d rather die trying to find him than leave him behind. It’s the only thought I have, the only thought that’s in my head. Find Joel. Get to Joel. Wherever he goes, I go. I pull to my feet, scoop the mud from my face, and sprint toward the churning river. It’s the quickest way to the Vale and the surest way to evade the prowling Deltas.

I stand on the bank gasping small panicked breath. The black water growls and roils, crested in broken whitecaps. That kind of water can kill quickly. I could be sucked under, and beaten and smashed to death on the rocks below. What choice do I have? None. I step into the water and grind forward. I cry out in shock. It’s freezing cold. My skin turns to ice. No way anyone could stay in this water for long. The current sweeps my legs and tugs me beneath the surface. I swallow mouthfuls of water, kick hard, and break through the surface.

I let the currents carry me downstream until I see the Vale’s cabins stretch larger and brighter, burst into full view, and rush past. I struggle toward the bank and hoist onto the shore. I sprint toward Tommy’s cabin as fast as I can but it’s slow going. Mud seeps my ankles, rises to my knees, and tugs-down my jeans. Trees crash to the ground, unrooted from the rain-soaked soil.

I get to the cabin and find its big board-and-batten shutters bolted shut. I heave myself against the front door and fumble with the handle. Locked. I run to the back of the house to try the back door. Dense rainfall drives straight down and kicks-up thick spray from the deeply-puddled earth. Lightening rips apart the sky and thunder booms my chest hollow.

I fumble with the back door handle. Locked. I sense someone or something come behind me. Before I can turn to look, an arm pulls me into a rear strangle hold. I know it’s Tommy from the feel of his body before I even see him. I thrash violently, drive my elbow deep into his armpit, and swing my pistol-wrapped fist blindly behind my head, cracking into flesh and bone till I slip to the ground. He grabs my ankle and winches me over the grass toward him.

I bleat terror, claw at the mud, and slam my boot into his hand until his fingers flay back. I scramble upright and sprint toward the shelter of the church. I feel something hard lash into my calf. The butt of a rifle, is what I’m picturing. I tumble to the ground and lay dazed. He hauls me into a rear strangle hold and starts dragging me toward the church. I fight against him but it’s futile. I have to hold onto his arm with all of my might and keep my head turned just right so he doesn’t choke me out. He kicks through the front doors and drags me down the center aisle toward the sanctuary. Above the altar, the sanctuary lamp glows red, casting the whole church in an eerie glow.

He swings me onto the altar and pins me to the granite slab. I thrash my hips and claw at him. His eyes are wild and black, and cast red from the altar’s candlelight. His skin glows pink. This is Hell, I think to myself. This is Hell and Tommy’s the Devil. He rips aside a straight-edge blade from his hip and wrenches back my chin.
“I’mma kill you tonight, Ellie,” he says, his eyes fearless and his lips curled into a mirthless grin. “Does that strike you about right?”

“No, Tommy!” I yell, piercing and panicked. “Lemme go!”

He flattens the cold steel blade against my neck. There’s no indecision in his eyes, just the unmistakable determination to kill me.

“Tommy!” a baritone voice yells from the direction of the door—Joel’s voice—followed by the crisp hitch of his rifle bolt as he draws a cartridge to the chamber. “Let her go, Tommy,” he says. “Drop your knife.”

“Joel!” I yell, my voice tight in panic. I strain upright, trying to catch sight of him. He stalks deliberately down the center aisle toward us, his rifle raised to combat ready. “God!” I yell. “Joel!”

“You keep outta this!” Tommy yells at me and drives me back down.

“You’re playing a dangerous game, Tommy,” Joel says.

“It’s the only one I know how to play and I’mma play it my way.”

“You’re gonna lose this hand.”

“This ain’t no cold-blooded affair. I’mma settle a debt I owe her—that’s all.”

“Flash that knife and I’ll kill you.”

“You ain’t killing me.”

“You sure about that?”

“You ain’t got the nerve to kill your own brother. You would’ve done it already.”

“I want you to know who’s killing you.”

“No man’s gonna threaten me! I never played second to no one and I ain’t starting now! I want what’s coming to me and I’mma take it.”

I squeeze my eyes shut and brace for the blade.

Boom! A shattering explosion contracts my stomach and thwacks my chest hollow. The altar shudders and vibrates beneath my shoulders like it’s been struck with a sledgehammer.

Eyes wide and wild, Tommy lets go of me and steps back from the altar. Lashing concussions detonate upriver. Low rumbling builds furiously into a deafening crescendo. Beyond the front doors, the black water of the river rears itself up into a white-topped mountain and barrels toward the church. I gasp and brace for impact.

Boom! The surging wall of water bursts apart the front façade and sweeps me from the altar. I kick through roiling whitecaps and break the surface, gasping for air. I cry out and the ice cold water sucks the breath out of me. My skin turns dead and my blood turns to ice. It feels like my whole body’s dying. This is how I’m going to die, I realize. Swept down the gorge and drowned with the others.

A spinning current catches me and whips me around, flinging me against the wall of the canyon. I slam into gnarled tree roots overhanging the steep valley wall. Blood floods into my head and the
blow rattles my bones. I cling to the roots and hold onto them with my thighs like I’m on a horse.

Rocks berthed on vicious floodwaters rip aside my windbreaker. If I don’t get out of this water, I’ll be crushed by these rocks, or something even larger passing on its way downriver. To be crushed like vermin might be an even-worse death than drowning. I don’t want to find out.

The water tears at me, pulling me down. I haul myself up, inch-by-inch, riding the roots like I’m riding a horse. I climb with an effort I’ve never summoned before. My whole body feels like it’s bursting apart, my muscles bright with pain. I haul myself onto the embankment, crawling on bridged limbs. I have to get away from the edge before it washes away into the chasm. How ironic would it be to get swept-away from solid land after such a struggle?

I pull myself up to my feet and take my first step on solid ground. My limbs shake wildly. I take another step. My feet slip in the mud and I fall on my face. I feel the cold wet earth beneath my cheek and I’ll never forget this feeling of solid ground beneath me, no matter how foul the mud smells. I hold onto this feeling and raise myself up to my feet again. I take a couple steps and fall down again. I feel the earth beneath me and cling to it with my hands. I hold onto the feeling of being part of solid earth until I burp spastically and vomit massive streams of water.

I finish vomiting and pull to my feet. Lightning illuminates a churning muddy vortex in the chasm below. This morning when I woke-up, this was the Snake River. It’s been here since the land was born. I used to swim in this. I listened to the sound of this river from the powerhouse windows at night. I washed my laundry in this river. Now it’s a massive muddy frothing canyon of naked corpses and bloated livestock funneling past propane tanks, warped timber, and uprooted trees. White roots whip the frothy mud, and splintered cabins shudder and crunch as they’re ferried downstream.

Swept miles downriver, everything lays buried in mud and erased by floodwaters. Grief, loss, and displacement pale in the relief of survival. I’m alive but who knows for how long?

A flash of lightning rips through the darkness, drawing my eye to a burst of movement. It flashes again, illuminating two large figures running toward the timber, one chasing the other. What am I seeing? What’s this? Another burst of lightning—one, two, three strikes. It’s Joel. And he’s chasing Tommy. I swear I see this with my own eyes but none of this makes sense.

Tommy makes it to the timber. Right as he crosses into it, he stumbles and falls to the ground. Joel drags him upright and hurls him against a trunk. Tommy bellows, bends deeply in half, and vomits water to the ground. I suppose he must have a blade concealed in his hand. I know I’m right because Joel hollers, staggers backward, and holds his upper arm where Tommy had cut him.

Tommy slashes for his brother again. Joel catches his wrist, thrusts his hand upwards, and bends it back with a visceral snap. Knife tumbling to the ground, Tommy bleats agony, his hand dangling oddly. His wrist’s broken.

Joel locks his fists, sweeps his arms above his head, and slams into Tommy’s neck. Tommy drops to the ground and sprawls supine with his knees unhinged. Joel crashes down at Tommy’s side and bashes his head against a flat rock before lunging for the knife, half-buried in mud.

“No!” I yell, crying-out in anguish. “Joel, no! For God’s sake, no!” It’s useless. My voice is swallowed by the rippling thunder.

Joel tosses back an arm and thrusts the blade deep into Tommy’s chest. Tommy stiffens and rattles a choking gasp, his eyes wide in terror.
I sprint toward them, stumbling on trembling legs, desperate to avert what’s already happened. Horror grips me. His own brother as his enemy!

I reach Joel and my legs falter, pitching me to the ground. I sob deep anguish and tear at the mud. Joel doesn’t see me, doesn’t know I’m at his back. Every sound is covered by the rumbling cracking thunder, the rushing floodwaters, and the steady drum of rain.

Joel scans the darkness. Our eyes connect. His face flashes recognition and a second later, venomous rage. He strides over, hauls me from the ground, and shakes me by the shoulders till my hair flops all over my face. It’s the first time he’s treated me so cruelly and violently.

“Brace-up, child!” he yells, his neck corded and his canines pared. “Stop your goddamn blubbering! I’ve got no ear for your sorrows. If we get outta this alive, it won’t help nothing! If we die, we’re finally done with this hell!”

He hauls me past Tommy’s still flat body and rushes us into the timber.

END OF JACKSON

ACT I OF THE GREAT BEYOND

BY ELSIE GLASS

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