### The Great Beyond Act II: Big Drift

**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. That night, the world died another death. Gone was the hope for a cure. But what about that man? His name is Joel Miller. There’s not a single drop of his blood in my veins 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. I’m a better person for it and I learned the truth about so many things.

#### Notes

This is Act II of The Great Beyond a ~300k-word three-act fan fic based on The Last of Us video game (2013) by the game development studio, Naughty Dog, a Bruce Straley/Neil Druckmann joint.

Please read my Author's Notes on Act I for more background.

In case you haven't read Act I, you can find a recap below.

Graphic obscenity, explicit situations, and unflinching violence runs throughout this work.
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

Act I Recap

After a dangerous journey across post-apocalyptic America to track down the elusive
Fireflies—a fifth column militia salvaging a cure for the world-annihilating cordyceps
pandemic—sixteen-year-old ELLIE WILLIAMS and her fifty-year-old guardian JOEL
MILLER ended their mission futilely, before her immunity could be harvested.

She and Joel landed in Jackson, Wyoming where Joel’s younger brother TOMMY
MILLER ran a settlement with his wife MARIA. Despite Jackson’s comforts, Ellie
struggled to fit-in among the rural homesteaders. During a mission outside the wire, Joel
was shot by an unseen enemy, and his convalescence forged a deep rift between him and
Ellie. While Ellie grew closer to Tommy, Joel grew closer to an obstinate widow EVE who
was bent on marriage.

Feeling threatened by Eve’s rivalry, Ellie fatally bit her, killing her in cold blood. Aware of
the severe impending punishment for her crime, Ellie set-off to broker an alliance with Joel.
Before she could reach him, she was captured by Tommy, who threatened to kill her in
revenge for Eve’s death. Joel interceded, but before the end of the standoff, a cloudburst
overwhelmed Jackson’s dam, flooding it out.

Swept away by the churning floodwaters, Ellie landed downriver where she spotted
Tommy and Joel locked in a violent brawl. Joel plunged a knife into Tommy’s chest and
fled with Ellie into the forest. Now read on!
Chapter One

Joel and I stare into the fire. We’re weary, bruised, and filthy. We’re both miserable in our own way. Me? Why shouldn’t I be? Him? He just killed his brother. Imagine that. Well, it happened. I saw it.

We sit across from each other on waterlogged spruce stumps around a cooking fire in a small forest clearing. Above the thick leafy canopy, ragged rain clouds skirt the mountains and vanish into the low skies. The air settles heavy, humid, and close.

We speak very little, silent and dejected. Not because we’ve both run-out of things to say. Not because we woke-up forgetting about yesterday’s vast annihilation. But because all the things that run between us go very, very deep. They can’t be aired-out over a night’s sleep or the turn of a day. We’ve both got blood on our hands. Neither of us will ever forget what we saw last night. We have to sit here and pretend everything’s normal or it’ll crush us.

Even if I wanted to talk about it, where would I start? Tommy tried to kill me. I know this. I felt the cold blade against my throat and the tremble of his hands. I suppose I don’t blame him. I tried to kill him first. He told me he’d kill me one day for it. It’s what a man like him would’ve done. It may be his way but it’s not my way. To kill someone who’s killed. To kill a man because he killed a man who killed a man. You can’t wash away one wrongdoing with another. It gets you nowhere. It doesn’t matter. I can’t make Tommy into a martyr because nothing of him remains, not even a lock of hair. I have no choice but to move on.

What’s Joel make of all this? Who knows? I can tell he’s full of heavy thoughts. Heavy and silent with thoughts. He won’t be consoled, that’s for sure. I wouldn’t have the right words to console him even if I wanted to. I suppose I feel so miserable because he’s so miserable. I have no regrets about killing Eve. She would’ve died anyway. The washout, you know. It would’ve swept her away with the others. In fact, I could’ve murdered the entire settlement last night without a shred of guilt. Ashley, Burke, Eve. They would’ve all died anyway, swept away with the river. They’re all dead. Dead and gone. We’ll never see any of them ever again. I didn’t cause any of this, so why should I be so upset?

I suppose I’m mourning Tommy’s death. May God have mercy on him. Be merciful to him, God, or Lord, or whatever’s up there running things. Tommy broke a lot of commandments but he was a good man. I think about what happened last night and I don’t understand it at all. When I think about it, I feel like crying but I don’t. It’s just an emotion, I tell myself. Deaden it. Emotions get you in big trouble.

Last night, I watched Joel as he slept at my side. I couldn’t sleep. I was too badly shaken to even think about sleeping. I was struck at how peacefully he slept. He was out cold. His breath was calm. His brow was smooth. He slept so easily. But he’d just killed his brother. I saw this happen. I saw him do it. So I started to wonder if maybe it didn’t happen at all. Maybe it was just a dream. Maybe Joel killed someone else. Someone who looked like his brother. How could he sleep so peacefully after what he just did? I have Eve’s blood on my hands but I have no regrets. I need to be clear about this. I feel the same as if I’d killed vermin. A mosquito. A pest. No one would blame me for doing it. Even with a clear conscience, I still couldn’t sleep. How could Joel not regret killing his brother? How could he sleep so peacefully after doing something like that? I bury these
questions. I’ll never ask him and he’d never tell me, anyway.

The problem is, you can’t let big things like this go. You can’t hold your breath and pray everyone forgets what happened. It doesn’t work like that. You can’t pretend things didn’t happen. You can’t be afraid of confronting them. If you let these kinds of wounds fester, they become infected until they kill you. They must be confronted. The time will come. It may not be now but it will come.

I twirl a squirrel shish-kabob over the flames, wincing. Every muscle in my body aches from last night’s effort. Muscles I didn’t even know I had. I glance at Joel. He looks diminished since I last saw him a week ago. His tan’s faded translucent. His forehead’s deeply-furrowed. His eyes are burnt-out and hollow, and his mouth’s bitter and colorless. I study his face to try to see if something’s changed. Something to explain the reason he never came to look for me at the powerhouse, never told me he was leaving me behind. I can’t find anything. He looks and feels exactly the same as always. Joel’s Joel.

We eat in despondent fatigue. I’m not hungry but my slack belly growls, reminding me to fill it. I’m running on empty after last night’s drift, which finally ended when we found a shallow cave carved into a sheer granite wall past a waterfall. Caves are very dumb places to hole-up. Everyone knows this. It’s where ferals, convicts, and rebels hole-up. We had no choice, pushed to the end of our reserves and soaked to the bone. If you get ambushed in a cave, you’re as good as dead. We didn’t care. We’re still drawing breath and little else matters. We’re happy to have evaded death but unenthusiastic to be alive.

I woke this morning like a bear with a toothache. Bruised and battered. Joel was already awake and he was gearing-up. I could tell by his evasive manner I wasn’t invited wherever he planned on going. I opened my mouth to speak a couple times but nothing came-out. When I finally worked-up the nerve to ask him where he was going, he was like, ‘I’m going where I’m going,’ which is a very typical Joel thing to say when he’s angry. Right before he left, he shot me a murderous look and said, ‘Now listen here, Ellie, and listen good. Not a single boot, hoof, or claw falls in this here country without a hundred hidden predators taking note. You leave this cave, don’t bother coming back. Do as you damn please. I ain’t coming to find you.’

After he left, part of me wondered if he was coming back at all. The fact is, he can move quicker and go further without me. He wouldn’t have to worry about a second mouth to feed. He could make the most of his own kit. He could eat and cook what he pleased and he wouldn’t have to share it with me. He’d have absolute freedom. He could sleep and rise when he wanted, and do whatever he wanted without worrying about me. No obligations and no deference to my wants or needs.

When we drifted from Boston to Salt Lake City, I thought about this all the time. I wondered if I’d wake-up one morning and find him gone, like he’d reached his limit. He’d walk-off, thinking, ‘Well, that’s the end of that. No more stopping every hour ‘cause Ellie’s gotta pee. No more waking-up shivering ‘cause she hogged our only blanket. No more passing-up plump game ‘cause she said it was too cute to kill. Good riddance to her and best wishes for a good quick death!’

About halfway through our drift, something changed. I don’t know what exactly, but something did. Now when he left on solo scout, he’d start saying, ‘Ellie, if I don’t return, you’ll know I’m dead.’ I suppose this sounds morbid and fatalistic. Could you imagine your loved one saying this to you before they left to go somewhere? But I understood what he really meant. It was his way of telling me he’d never willingly separate or leave me behind. His way of telling me he’d always find his way back to me, no matter what. Only death could keep him from coming back to find me. I hope he still feels the same way. I hope he doesn’t leave me behind. I can’t say I’d blame him, though.
He finishes his squirrel and tosses the remains into the crackling fire. I lay my half-eaten portion over a flat rock and swig boiled water from an old beer bottle that he’d brewed-up for me.

In the distance, a flock of birds squawks and beats-off. These birds tell us everything they know, like the things we can’t see because we’re stuck down here on the ground. I’m familiar with this bird call. This call was sent in alarm to warn its kin of an ambush, a stalker, or a prowler. Joel knows this, too, because he’s the one who taught it to me.

He springs to his feet and swings his rifle to combat-ready. He stands there, tracking the world down his barrel, swiveling his head, his eyes everywhere at once. This isn’t the protocol. I suppose it’s been so long since we last drifted he’s forgotten the protocol. Run. We run. See, we always try make our cooking fire in a small clearing in the timber, just like we did here. We do this so when we hear enemies approaching, we can leave quickly and disappear into the timber before they arrive. Or hide in the timber and ambush them if they have something we need.

Joel barks my name and urges me to move. I pull to my feet and stand right behind him, which is where he always wants me to go when we’re under immediate threat. Soon enough, faint footfalls thrum in the distance. The direction’s indiscernible. Something’s coming. The birds were right. The footfalls coalesce into the sound of someone jogging heedlessly through the timber, coming straight toward us. Twigs snap and branches swish. It grows louder and closer until a large figure cuts through the thick brush right in front of us. A big filthy man.

He’s taller and broader than Joel. He wears a too-large too-warm sheepskin coat over military camos shrunken and faded in weather. On second glance, he’s wearing layers and layers of clothes, which you can see through large holes in each layer. It makes him look bigger than he really is, though he’s still a very big man. His face is grey and pained beneath a long thick ashy beard. He’s got a mean tight thin mouth. His cheeks are pocked in black frostbite scars. He stares at us silently with bulging black wild eyes. He hasn’t blinked once. He’s got that dejected hopeless look of a perpetual drifter.

“State your business!” Joel yells.

“I mean you no harm,” he says, his voice low and graveled. “I’m desperate hungry.”

“Move on,” Joel says, his voice magnified in threat and his jaw rigid against the rifle barrel.

“I haven’t eaten in five days nor slept in ten,” he says. “I’m nearly starved.” He touches the rim of his greasy boonie hat and glances at our fire. “I’d take it as a right kindly act if you’d sell me some vittles.”

“Ain’t nothing for you here,” Joel says.

“You can shoot me if you like but I can’t go no further without grub.”

Joel won’t shoot him. He wouldn’t waste a bullet on him. This drifter isn’t worth a bullet. He’s so repulsive and wretched, I pity him. He keeps scratching himself. He must be full of lice. Bedbugs. Tapeworms. The possibilities are endless.

“We bagged squirrel,” I say and gesture at my half-eaten portion. “You can finish mine.”

He glances at Joel before addressing me. “I can eat over here, ma’am.”

He can, but I like to think of myself as a decent person. I know what it’s like to be cold, wet, starved, filthy, and alone. I realize this man could’ve been me if I hadn’t run into Joel last night. Perpetually drifting, alone and homeless. “You can sit over there,” I say and gesture toward my
stump. I know Joel’s going to be angry with me but this man’s pitiful. He’s in worse shape than us and he’s all alone. We’ll feed him and send him on his way.

He takes off his hat with trembling hands and hangs his head low. He walks to the fire, moving slowly and deliberately. He sits on the stump and I hand him my squirrel. He rips it from me and tears into the charred meat, his feverish eyes glittering, his cheeks bulging, and his lips smacking. He glances at us furtively as he forces morsels into his mouth with clawed greasy fingers. The visceral noises coming from his mouth are disgusting. I feel bad thinking this about a starving man but everything about him’s repulsive. I’ve seen and heard a lot of disgusting things in my life, and this ranks way up there. Someone who makes these kinds of noises while eating should eat in private.

After he sucks the last morsels from the skewer, he scatters the bones from his lap and gazes at us with a tranquilized half-smile. “Haven’t had a morsel since the rains,” he says as if it weren’t obvious. “Haven’t seen folks in so long I forgot what folks looked like. Haven’t seen childs since I said goodbye to mine.” He stares into the middle distance. “Me and my lady were drifting with the childs. She got sick and couldn’t run no more. I sat with her till she died. She died crying, ‘Save the childs!’ I couldn’t bury her. Nothing to dig a hole. We ran. We had no food. The childs got sick and died holding hands. I wanted to die—lay down and die—but I go on.” He addresses Joel. “What be your name?”

Joel doesn’t respond.

“What’s hers?” he asks Joel, meaning me.

Neither of us respond.

“Name’s Arson,” he says.

“I didn’t ask,” Joel says.

“She’s yours?” Arson asks Joel, meaning me.

“She ain’t my breed,” Joel says.

“Y’all from far away?” Arson asks. “Y’all don’t speak like folks.”

“Boston,” I say.

Joel sighs guttural and shifts his feet impatiently. He’s suffering every second of this. He looks at Arson and swivels his head toward the timber. Arson. Timber. Arson. Timber. I suppose he’s being cautious. Arson could be a decoy for a larger faction. I think about this. It’s impossible. No way. No one could drift with a man who eats like this. They’d last one meal.

“How do y’all know this trail?” Arson asks. “Y’all got a horse? A saddle? A bridle?”

“That’s none of your business,” Joel says.

“Where are y’all headed? Anywhere in particular?”

Joel doesn’t respond.

“Y’all got any cigarette makings?”

“You talk too much,” Joel says. “Time to get going and get going quick.”
“I’mma borrow y’alls fire for what’s left of the day,” Arson says. “I’ve got business here.”

“What kinda business?” Joel asks.

“Y’all won’t believe me. No one ever does. I’ve gotta wait for them. Have y’all seen them?”

“Seen who?” Joel asks.

“Them.” He gestures toward the forest. “I’ve gotta wait for them, keep them away.”

“Keep who away?”

“Them.” He waves his hand impatiently. “I’ve gotta keep them away from this. It’s mine. It belongs to me. They’ll never get it. Not while I’m still here! Most are gone. Some are dead. Killed them and buried them myself.” He stamps his foot over the ground. “The holy river,” he says in a conspiratorial tone with a hand flat aside his mouth like he’s telling us a big secret. “It flows deep inside, deep below. One sip of its water purifies a man. He enters the land of the Gods, all his sins gone. Poof!”

Oh, man. This guy’s a lunatic, is what we’re both thinking. Harmless but delusional. A real mountaineer. Just as I start wondering how we’re going to shake him, Joel grabs him by the lapels. He hauls him to his feet and hurls him like a bale of hay in the direction he arrived. Arson stumbles forward and lands prone to the ground where he lays motionless, sprawled on his stomach, groaning a bit. Joel flips up his rifle and furiously extinguishes the cooking flames with his stock. Pink embers illuminate his face livid. He looks like the Devil.

A guttural war cry sounds from where Arson landed. Having risen from the ground, he barrels toward Joel in a cavalry charge. He holds a sawed-off shotgun above his head, which must’ve been concealed beneath his layers of clothes. He smashes the shotgun’s fore-end over Joel’s head with a sickening thud. Joel’s face flashes a look of surprise, and he stumbles backward and falls to the ground. I rush over to him. Blood flows down the side of his face from a large gash alongside his eye. It snakes down his jaw and neck.

Arson grabs my arm. I cry-out and fight against him. Joel grapples for my shirt. Arson rips me away and pins me to his side. He backstrokes the shotgun barrel and jabs the muzzle under my chin. I almost piss my pants. He holds it there firmly. He means business. No good will come of this. This will not end well.

“Cowboy!” he yells at Joel. “Hands up! On your head! One move and I’ll splatter the trees with her!”

Joel tents his hands to his head. “Harm her and I’ll kill you,” he says through his teeth.

“You follow, I kill her,” Arson says, his voice savage. He grabs Joel’s rifle from the ground and slings it over his shoulder, dragging me alongside. “You’ve got a right pretty daughter, cowboy. It’s gonna be a real pleasure pounding her tight little pussy. I’mma fuck her tight little ass till I tear the shit outta it.”

Jesus Christ. My whole body breaks-out in a cold sweat. Now what? Now what happens? I could bite him but I suppose he’d still have enough time to rape and kill me first.

Arson holds me by my lapels and rushes us toward the direction he arrived. Crash! Shattering glass sounds at our backs. Shards explode in the air all around us. Arson makes a gurgling noise and drops to his knees, his shotgun flying from his hand. Crack! A fiery shotshell flares the barrel as it slams to the ground. Steel slugs violently propel the timber in a menacing arch. Arson bridges over
the ground and grasps at his nape where a large glass shard protrudes from it. I realize it’s my beer bottle, thrown by Joel, the closest weapon he had on-hand.

Joel barrels toward us. He swipes his fallen rifle from the ground and slams the stock into Arson’s back, knocking him flat on his face. He pins him down with his boot and smashes the back of his skull with his stock. The only sounds are the rude crunching of his skull and Joel’s cries of anguish. He beats Arson till he lays flat and still with a gory puddle splattered around his head.
“That was close,” I say. “Too fucking close.”

Joel slams down his rifle, his eyes flashing malice. “Now ain’t you a damn foolish child,” he says, his voice hardened in anger and edged in disgust. He takes a big step toward me and shoves me to the ground.

I land on my back, dazed. What’d he do that for? Why’d he do that? He bends over me and grabs me by the wrists. “What are you doing?” I yell and fight against him, kicking and shouting. He starts walking purposely upland, dragging me by my arms through the cold slippery mud. “Let go of me!” I yell and thrash wildly. Where’s he taking me? What’s he doing? I kick-out raucously, trying to hook my foot around the passing trunks. He heaves me into the middle of a large muddy puddle. I bolt upright into a sitting position, gasping in shock as the cold heavy wet mud seeps through my clothes. He shoves me back down into the mud, pinning me onto my back with his boot over my chest. I try to rear-up but he’s too strong.

“Don’t even try it,” he sneers.

“What are you doing?” I yell, fighting against him.

“Burrying you!” he yells. “You wanna die?”

“No! Stop!”

“The way you’ve been carrying on? Like your life ain’t precious? Like it holds no value? You’d trade it away for nothing—for no gain at all! I didn’t teach you how to die! I taught you how to survive! Like knowing your own name! Tying your own shoes! Up from down, back from front, left from right! Little things you learn as a child and relearn every goddamn day of your life! I ain’t fixing on dying anytime soon! If you’re so lonesome to die, there’s plenty out here who’ll do it for you!”

He stands over me, seething rage, his whole body vibrating anger. I sputter grime from my lips, laid flat on my back. I feel the heavy mud seeping everywhere. Cold, thick, and squishy. Foul and unclean.

“Get up, child,” he says. “Time to get up.”

And how do you suppose I do that, Joel, I ask him silently. I’d have to roll onto my side and crawl through the mud like a filthy injured beast rolling around in its own shit. I’m overwhelmed by the heavy smell of it on my skin. My face flushes hot with blood and I feel like I’m going to throw-up. No. I am going to throw up. I roll onto my side and retch. I retch robustly—one, two, three times. I bring nothing up but the taste of seared squirrel and a little spittle.

He takes my arm and starts pulling me to my feet, my boots slipping around the mud as I find my footing. I wipe my face, intending to clean it, but it just smears the cold thick mud around even more.

“Are we square?” he asks and knifes a filthy hand toward me, gesturing for a handshake.
I want to tell him to take his handshake and shove it up his ass. I want to rip off his entire arm, is what I want to do. I know I can’t physically hurt him. He’s too big and strong. It doesn’t matter. I throw myself at him, swinging my fists against him. He draws an arm over his head, deflecting my blows. None of them land. This makes me angrier.

“Go on, get rid of it,” he says. “That’s right. Get it outta your system. Don’t go carrying it around.” He lets me swing at him for a bit until he catches my arms and pulls me into a hug. “That’s enough, now, Ellie. That’s enough.”

He tried to bury me. This is something he tried to do. He tried to bury me in the foul stinking mud like a dog buries its shit. He treated me like a dumb filthy animal who rolls around in its own filth and shit. I picture this and I feel lower than shit. We’ve been out here less than a day and I almost got us killed. Killed by a lunatic mountaineer. I have the acute understanding I’d never survive one day on my own. I’d inevitably do something stupid and get myself killed. It’s one thing to get myself killed but another to get Joel killed. I’m overcome by great desolation and shame. Anguish tightens my throat. I weep bitterly, the misery too great to bear in silence.

“Go on, get rid of it,” he says and holds me tighter. “Don’t go carrying it around.”

I cry over my own stupidity. How we miraculously evaded death only to be lured right back into it by my foolishness. I cry tears of relief he saved me from myself, once again. He’s all I have left in this world. All I have left in this world is him, the dirty torn clothes on my back, and my mud-caked boots. He’ll survive anything and he’ll make sure I survive with him, too.

After a heartrending cry, I pull away from him. I feel like I owe him an explanation. I acted in good faith and I want him to know this. I wanted to see if I was still capable of doing good considerate things after killing Eve in cold blood. “I’m sorry,” I say. “I was just trying to be nice.”

“Nice doesn’t count for nothing no more,” he says. “The values you once held sacred don’t matter no more—honor, dignity, justice, kindness, truth. They don’t mean nothing when you’re dying, nameless and alone, in an unknown land. Mankind would rather kill you quick than wait to see who you are and he’ll cast lots for everything you’ve left behind. I know him well enough to know what he’d like to do to you. He knows your weaknesses and he’ll play upon them till your death. He ain’t like Mother Nature. She’ll try to destroy you, give you everything she’s got, but she’s got no particular malice against you. No use getting riled-up.

“In the end, fate decides. When your turn comes, it doesn’t matter if you’re armed to the teeth. Your life hangs by a thread. There’ll come a day when the temperature drops one degree too cold or you’ll take a wrong turn and you’ll die right where you lay. Any second could be your last. Death’s just a step away, breathing down your back, waiting to exploit a moment of bad luck. It doesn’t help matters by being careless. Trouble’ll come find us soon enough.”

“We’re still here, right?” I ask.

“We got lucky.”

“Think we’re the only ones?”

“You’ve got a bad habit of dwelling on the past. Don’t go borrowing trouble. Stay blind to everything but what’s before you.”

“Are the storms over?” I ask.

“Wasn’t storms. Cloudbursts. Parked over us, dumped its load. Dam couldn’t hold and the
embankments gave out. Not just ours. Probably more upriver. Reservoirs overflowed the banks, breached the dams, and the surge washed everything out. Rocksslides took care of the rest. If anything’s still standing, it’s buried in mud.”

Gold. Tommy. I realize a gravely-injured man didn’t stand a chance last night. I bury my face in my hands and weep again.

“Why’re you crying?” he asks and pulls me back into a hug.

“I lost everyone,” I say, my voice thin with tears.

“You have,” he says. “But I’m still here.”

I’ll never forget he said this. He’s still here. After I’ve been so reckless and foolish, he’s still on my side. I realize something important. People are all we possess in this world. There’s nothing worth possessing unless it’s a gun or a knife or something useful like a tool to help you survive, eat, or protect yourself and your loved ones. But even if you had everything you wanted, how many things could you possibly collect in this world? And where would you keep them all? People are the only things we have in this world worth anything at all. People are the most important things in the world. You can love them or hate them, help them or hurt them. But they’re all we have. Joel’s mine and I’m his.

We bed down in the cave under a deep dusk. We yank-off our waterlogged mud-caked boots and massage our cold clammy feet. He’s meticulous about foot care when we drift, says a man’s as good as dead without healthy feet and a decent pair of shoes. Even nights under threat like this, we air-out our boots and massage our feet to keep away rot and infection. We dry our damp socks beneath our waistbands and stuff them into our pockets.

Headachy and flushed, I rest my head against his shoulder, his flannel shirt perfumed with birch smoke from the cooking fire. I sense his thoughts gathering-up.

“I did my best,” he says, his voice soft. “Tried to toughen you up. Make you disciplined and self-reliant. Accepted no excuses and no explanations. I demanded results and I corrected your weaknesses. But you’re unaccountable. Reckless. You’ve got no contempt for death. You forgot whatever good sense you had. Those kinds of notions are gonna get us into a heap of trouble. Out here, everything’s the enemy. Predators never stop prowling for prey. The only dangerous man’s a man not yet dead. We maintain our lives at the cost of lives. We keep our reserves full and preserve our precious skin. Ain’t time for nothing else.”

“I’ll do better,” I say. “I promise.”

“A promise isn’t good enough. Now that we’re drifting, follow me and do as I do. I do the thinking, you do the obeying. No more standing around, arguing, thinking, or hesitating. Listen to me and do as you’re told. It’s the difference between life and death. Are we clear?”

“Clear.”

“There’s gonna be a whole lotta things you’re gonna have to learn, and even more you’re gonna have to unlearn. Out here’s hard and fast rules, settled with a gun. Kill or be killed. Eat or be eaten. Folks are always hungry and hungry folks kill.”
Milky light slips through the early morning fog. Sunrise floods the mountains and contours the crisp blue sky. Without Jackson's lessons, meals, or chores, hours are of little consequence. Time’s measured by mileage, and quartered into essential divisions: becoming daylight, daylight, becoming darkness, and darkness. We sleep when we can, and rest if we can’t, where and when we want.

We hike to the rim of a great outcropping to get our bearings. I stand on the ledge and look out across. You can see Arkwright Valley and back up to where Jackson once stood, framed by three overlapping mountains. No more than an ugly brown scar. Something that was and is no more. Ripped from everything we knew and hurled toward something else. It’s unbelievable to think it’s all gone. Wiped-out like it never existed. Eden’s gardens, the Ark’s stables. Everything we cultivated and struggled to rear. The memories it all holds. All gone. This morning’s sunrise was one of the billions since the earth was born but it was totally different than yesterday’s when everything was still fresh, brilliant, intact, and alive.

I wasn’t around for the Critical but now I think I understand. Twenty-one years of hard work and toil at Jackson, and it’s all gone. Gone without a trace. I can’t wrap my head around the enormity of it. You see so much death and destruction, you stop processing it. Your eyes take-in so much trauma, they stop sending information to your brain.

I don’t feel bad Jackson’s no longer there. I feel bad for what it meant to so many people who lived there. I think of all the victims who were too young to die. The older ones who were full of so much wisdom and experience. What’s the sense in this? What’s the point of praying for these people? Even if there were bodies to bury, could you imagine all those coffins? It kicks you in the heart.

I still have pleasant memories of my time there, even if I was an outsider, didn’t mix, and was bullied endlessly. I felt a sense of community. It was a nice place. I learned so much about myself. I thought I was toughened-up from Boston but it was deceptive. At Jackson, I learned using your hands every single day teaches you important values. I’m better for it and appreciative of it, as much as I’m glad we’re moving on. I realize I don’t miss the surroundings but rather the people. The people who I could talk to about anything. Cities, towns, and places are dead without people. It’s the people in those places who make them come to life. People are so much more important than the things we build or carry. It’s the people who make those places unforgettable.

I feel something different now. I guess I feel a sense of contentment. I know it’s very strange to feel that way after something so earth-shattering, with all that destruction so close at our backs and all the unknown dangers that lie ahead. I’m happy to be alive. I’m happy to be alive with Joel. I’ve grown so much since Boston and Jackson. We were there for a handful of months. Was it only that long? It feels like so much longer.

I’ve never been nostalgic about things I’ve left behind. I never really thought about the meaning of all the places I’ve lived. But I feel a sense of loss. Jackson was one of the only two places I ever knew as a home. I try to let my mind detach from the memories. I try to remind myself of the dangers of getting attached to people, places, and things. It’ll kill me. Jackson’s just a place I left. That’s all it is.

We head back to the stream to bathe. We slap our wet laundry across the riverbed granite and lay it over flowering bushes to dry. Joel field-strips his arsenal. He gives me a 9mm pistol with a handful of ammo, and a regular-sized magazine he’d scavenged. It’s nice to be armed again, to feel the reassuring weight of a gun in my hand.
We bag plump dark-eyed mourning doves and roast them over a small chip fire. He draws his blade and offers me the first carve. As I eat, he says it’s time to hit the trail, says we’ve lingered too long. The valley will be full of ravaging disease when the floodwaters recede, parasites brewed in nature’s incubator of rot, fungus, bacteria, and mold.

He’s impatient to travel in these kinds of conditions. He says once the ground dries and hardens, more and more military and fifth columns will move about with ease, especially on horses and vehicles. With this kind of muddy uneven ground, folks tend to stay put. It’s safer for us to go now, so we go.
A hand-carved wooden signpost marks the entrance to a footpath winding-up a wooded hill. Sacred Way’s not secret. Whatever’s at the top makes no effort to conceal itself. It’s not Secret Way. It’s not Secret Way, huh, Joel? I make this joke and he acts like he doesn’t hear me. He’s not in a good mood. We’ve been running around an airless valley of thick timber all morning. We’re hot and sweaty, and we’ve lost our way. A clear vantage would be advantageous, so he says we’ll go see what’s up at the top.

About halfway up the rise, an anguished piercing cry sounds from the top of the plateau. Joel hears it, too. I know this because we look at each other with wide eyes. It’s not a nice cry. A cry of alarm. Probably human, probably female. Joel grabs me and draws me close. “Don’t you breathe,” he whispers. I suppose we’re too close to the top to turn around, so we press on. We silently ascend the rise till we reach the top, a large flat plateau covered in tall grass. A small steel fire tower sits in the middle. It’s clear something’s happening here. The air’s charged with tension. Knots of people descend the fire tower stairs.

We prone-out behind the felled timber at the rim of the clearing to watch. Three kitted-up muscular men with long guns lead four hostages down the stairs. The men aren’t military nor fifth columns. They don’t look like rebels, either, and I don’t see any horses. They look like hunters, led by a beefy man with a black beard. The hostages look like a family. A black family, minus the father-figure. A tall thin woman carries a crying toddler. Behind her are two stoic teenagers in faded t-shirts and jeans. They have the same athletic build as her, and the girl has the same pretty face and braids as her.

“Are they gonna kill them?” I whisper to Joel.

“I reckon those kinda men are gonna do whatever they’ve set out to do,” he whispers.

When they reach the bottom of the stairs, the hostages are marched to the edge of the shady grass beneath the tower.

“Shut that kid up!” the leader yells at the woman, meaning the crying toddler she’s holding. “If you don’t, I will.”

“Hush, Jack!” she begs the child. She covers his mouth and shifts him over her hip. “Listen to Momma! Please!” His sobs build into bleats, hiccupped in hysteria. The leader shifts impatiently. He’s had enough. He rips the child from her arms. She howls and swipes for him. He shoves her to the ground and hurls the child to her side, his head cracking on impact with a sickening crunch.

I gasp. What kind of person does this? What kind of world is this? What’s the reason for this terror? This isn’t sensible, this terror. This isn’t right. What kind of person kills a child like that? Joel tenses at my side. I feel his muscles gathering-up for action. He swings his rifle over the log and draws a cartridge from the magazine to the chamber. He intends to kill these men.
“Tell me what to do,” I say.

“Chambered?” he asks.

I unholster my pistol and squint down the slide. “Loaded.”

“Line up a shot.”

“Which one?”

“Don’t think—just do what I say.”

I target a hunter with a high and tight blond buzz-cut. My whole face breaks-out in a cold sweat. My hands turn cold and sweaty. I haven’t fired a gun nor killed under Joel’s command in a long time. I don’t know how I’m supposed to feel about this. I suppose I’m proud he thinks I’m capable but I’m also hesitant to get involved in their slaughter, no longer just a spectator.

The woman gathers her lifeless child to her chest and moans deep anguish. The leader rears back his rifle and smashes the stock into her forehead, knocking her to the ground. A sickening fractured blow echoes the field. No way she survived that, is what we’re thinking.

“On my mark,” Joel says. “On three, two, one—mark.” Crack! The leader jerks, mists red, and folds immobile, his lungs ruptured and his shoulders broken by Joel’s .308. No doubt he’s dead.

Pack! Pack! I pop-off two shots at the blond hunter, bursting into his thighs. He drops to the ground screaming. I curse my sloppy marksmanship but I’m pleased by the sound of his screams. I suppose this makes me sound like a monster. So what.

The two teens use the diversion to sprint toward the cover of the woods where they disappear past the thick ridgeline. They’re very quick. Too quick for the third hunter who fires blindly after them, dropped to prone. It’s futile. They’re already out of the range of his bullets. We couldn’t save the mother and child but at least those two got away.

Crack! Joel cuts the hunter down with his rifle. One more hunter to kill—the one I wounded, still screaming in agony. I intend to finish the job. I target his writhing shoulders. Before I can fire-off the shot, Joel wrenches the pistol from my hand and says, “He ain’t going nowhere quick.”

We cut through the ridgeline and pursue the blood trail to the blond hunter. He drags his crippled body over the grass, bleeding-out from mangled flesh ribboning his fractured bones. He must sense our presence because he brandishes his pistol in a convulsing hand, his grey face beaded with sweat and his lips moving soundlessly. Joel kicks the pistol from his hand, and smashes his heel into his skull until he flattens and stills.

We sweep the slaughtered hunters and circle-back to the woman’s corpse. Lurid brain matter pools beneath her split skull. Clotted black blood slicks her braids. A raspy moan gurgles her throat. She’s alive? There’s no way she’s still alive. Her large clouded eyes flash lucid agony. She reaches a trembling hand toward Joel, grasping desperately for him. Her eyes are fixed on him, shining defiantly. I suppose she thinks he’s the hunter who hurt her and she’s trying to kill him. Joel must figure the same thing because he says, “Easy, ma’am. I ain’t the one who tried to kill you.”

“Is he still here?” she asks through stiff blue lips, the corners flayed in blood.

“No, ma’am,” he says.

“Did he get Rae? Imani? Jackson?”
“No, ma’am. They got away.” Joel’s lying. I hate liars but he did the right thing. Joel and I’ve seen plenty of people die. We both know she won’t make it. It’s too late. This is clear. At least she’s dying quietly and bravely, without fear or crying or moaning. What a dumb waste of a life, I think to myself.

Joel squints at the blazing sun shining mercilessly on her face and glances at the shady spot beneath the fire tower. I can put his thoughts together. He wants to move her to the shade so she can die in peace, without the glare of the sun in her face. “Ma’am,” he says, “we gotta move you. You don’t have much time.”

“Don’t touch me,” she says. “I’ll fall apart.”

“Do you know who got you?” he asks.

“I don’t know.”

This isn’t a surprise. Hunters kill to kill. They don’t need any reason to kill at all. I hold my hand against the sun, shading her eyes from the relentless glare. She seems appreciative. “Miss,” I ask, “is there anything we can do for you?”


Bishop. The name of a man, I suppose. Someone dear to her. A husband, a father, a son, a guardian. Okay, sure, but how the hell am I supposed to find a man named Bishop out here in this enormous wilderness? It’s absurd but it’s her dying wish so I say, “Miss, if you want your message delivered to Bishop, I’ll do it.” This is a ridiculous promise. Nobody has to tell me this. I made this lie in good faith. So there.


“Nothing else?” I ask.

“Tell him what I told you. He’ll know.” Her voice is gluey, soft, and thick. She doesn’t have much longer. I feel a deep sense of sadness for this woman. How much longer will she have to suffer? Every second’s a horror. Something comes to me. A mercy killing. I have a gun and we have plenty of ammo after sweeping the hunters. It seems like the right thing to do. I start reaching for my gun and remember Joel still has it, tucked below his waistband.

“Gimme my gun,” I say to him, gesturing at it.

“The wolves’ll finish her off,” he says. He doesn’t think she’s worth the bullet.

“She needs help.”

“I reckon the good Lord’s already doing that.”

I swipe for my pistol and he shoves me backward in stern warning. I stumble to the ground and fold softly on my ass. He rips my pistol from his waistband and stamps the muzzle to the woman’s temple. I squeeze my eyes shut, anticipating the shot, but it never comes. I open my eyes and look at the woman. It’s clear she’s already dead. I put my hand on her chest. I feel nothing.

Joel glares at me hard. “Now listen here. There’s a certain way of doing things.”

“She was suffering!” I yell.
“I ain’t asking your opinion. It doesn’t concern you. It might not be your way—we ain’t arguing that. You can’t run things to suit yourself. Get that through your head.”

He strides purposely to the stairs and I follow him up. On the top landing, we lean over the girders and look around. We’re in a fringed airless bowl intersected by glimmering silver rivers. Imposing glacial peaks frame the westward perimeters. “That-a-way,” he says and points toward the easterly basins spiked in slender motionless columns of pale smoke. “Way out yonder, South of Big Horn, north of the Laramies.”

He opens the cabin floor hatch and climbs the rungs. I follow. The cabin’s full of old mismatched furniture but it’s as pleasant as anyone could make it. Neat, clean, and orderly. While Joel scavenges for supplies, I study a large portrait hung over the bed’s headboard, a photo of a young black couple. The woman’s the same one as the one who just died, but younger. The man’s genial and muscled with his big arm slung around her shoulder. He’s got a proud look on his face. I figure it’s her husband. Maybe it’s the man she called Bishop. They sit on the stern of a large cruiser with The Black Baller scrolled across it. The water’s calm and the sky’s deep blue. They’re a happy beautiful young couple, untroubled and in love. And now she’s dead. We saved two lives but two were savagely taken. None of this makes sense.

Joel grabs my arm and shoves me toward the hatch. “Let’s move,” he says.

As I walk down the stairs, I can’t keep my eyes off the mother and child laid dead on the grass. I try to look away but I can’t. I try to tell myself none of this matters. It’s just dead bodies. Dead people. They’re lucky to be out of the game. Be thankful the other two got away. Be thankful the mother wasn’t forced to watch her children raped and murdered before they raped and killed her. Be thankful the mother and child died without being tortured. No more terror for them.

I reach the landing and I stop in my tracks. I can’t move on from this. I can’t. The bodies of the mother and child are going to roast on the grass till they’re eaten by scavenging birds and beasts. I’ve seen it. I’ve seen what scavengers do to dead bodies. It’s grotesque. What a terrible pointless death. I can’t just leave them for the wolves and the vultures. I feel like crying over them. I’m sorry they’re dead. I’m sorry they died like this. I’m sorry we didn’t get here sooner.

Joel notices I’ve hung back. He stops and glares at me across the distance, his face red from sunburn and impatience. “Come on, Ellie,” he calls, his voice firm and unwavering. “Come on. We’ve gotta hustle.”

“Gimme your trifold,” I say, meaning his foldable entrenching tool, which we use for everything from digging latrines to roasting game over the cooking fire. I intend to dig them a proper grave. I don’t know what’s come over me but I can’t leave them unburied. I can’t. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself.

Joel realizes my intention because he says, “The sun ain’t bothering them none.”

What a time to make a joke! “Give it to me,” I say sternly.

“No. We’re leaving. There’s no time. Not for this. We’re losing ground. It’s time to move on. You’ve already burdened yourself with a promise you can’t deliver.”

“Please gimme your trifold.”

“They’re dead and we’ll be, too, if we don’t move. Let’s go.”

I don’t move nor speak. I’m making him very angry. I can see his face and neck flushing even
redder with anger and impatience. I don’t care.

“Ellie,” he says, his voice commanding and shimmered in threat. “When I tell you to come, you come to me. Do you hear me?”

No, I won’t come to you, I say to him silently. I’m not like a dog you can just call when you want. I won’t come until they get a proper burial. Something urges me to do this.

He pulls himself up full length. “I’ll leave you here if you don’t come. I’ll do it. I’m not gonna die out here. Someone’ll be back. They’ll hear the shots and they’ll be back.”

“Then you’d better get going,” I say.

So be it. I turn away from him, and drop to my knees at the side of the mother and child. I start ripping-up the grass and the earth with my hands. I’ll dig the grave myself. Easier said than done. The ground’s hardened from the sun. This’ll take forever, I think to myself, but it’ll get done. I pray he doesn’t leave me but this feels bigger than his wants and needs. This feels like something I have to do. He might leave me here all alone. This might be his breaking point. He’ll leave me behind. He can travel further and faster on his own. He’d be free of me, no longer burdened by me or my limitations or my selfishness.

I hear his footsteps approaching and I exhale a sigh of relief. He's walking in hasty angry strides. He’s so angry you could light a match on him. Actually, forget the match. His pants could spontaneously burst into flames the way he’s stomping. I hear him come behind me, followed by the defiant thud of his pack as he drops it from his shoulders to the ground. I hear the zipper rip down and the hollow metallic clink of the trifold as he leverages it into shape. Inches from my digging hands, he stabs the shovel into the ground. I pull to my feet and watch him dig.

He digs quickly with angry efficient strokes. He grunts as he digs, his clothes quickly soaked in sweat, and his face wet and red in exertion. I know he resents every second of this, resents me for making him waste his precious energy, resents me for making him burn our precious time on something he feels is so insignificant and outright reckless. He digs mechanically, looking-up every ten seconds or so to scan the landscapes, ready to run.

The scent of fresh damp earth mixes with the scent of death, the bodies baking in the sun. I try to be useful. I draw my pistol and stand overwatch. After he digs a shallow grave, he drags-in the bodies and covers them with dirt. The soil needs to be covered with something heavy like rocks or else the wolves will find them. Their bodies will be devoured at nightfall by the hungry wolves. I look around and there’s nothing but grass on this grassy plain. I realize it’s too much to ask him to scavenge and haul rocks from the surrounding timber. I have to let it go. This is good enough.

I kneel at the side of the grave to say a quick blessing. “God,” I say, “or whatever’s up there in Heaven, please watch over these two and keep them safe.” I want to add ‘Amen’ but I suppose it sounds too religious and maybe they weren’t religious.

I feel Joel’s hand close around my arm. He pulls me to my feet and faces me square. I wince, expecting his anger, but it’s burned down to something else. I know he can read my fear of him on my face. My fear of him and his bad moods. I’m sure it bothers him I expect rage from him. But I see something else in his eyes. Something significant to him but unknown to me. He looks very pained but not physical pain. Something deeper. My heart knifes to think I’ve caused him to feel like that. I wonder if my sadness for the mother and child made him question his ability to feel sad, like I’ve challenged his impassivity. He must feel like an emotionless animal. Just moving forward without thinking of anything but moving forward and filling his belly. Moving himself forward without pity, compassion, love, or forgiveness. Say less and move on. It’s hard to know with him
what it’s dragged up from deep inside. He searches my face but he doesn’t speak. I keep waiting for him to speak but he doesn’t so I speak to break the awkward silence. “I’m sorry they’re dead,” I say.

“Forget about it,” he says, his voice soft. “Forget it. There’s no time. There’s no time for this. Do you understand?”

I don’t understand and I tell him this. “No, I don’t.”

“There’s no time,” he says. “We killed the men who killed them. That’s all that matters.”

“You don’t care they’re dead,” I say, challenging him. This is what I’m afraid of. I’m afraid he’s lost all sense of compassion. He killed his brother and slept peacefully that same night. I’m afraid he’s got no feelings or compassion left in his heart at all. He looks like a human but he’s no longer a human. He’s no different than an animal. His heart’s turned to stone.

“We gave them a burial. It’s more than anyone gets.”

“Thank you.”

“You tell me something right now,” he says. “Do you wanna live or do you wanna die?”

“You know the answer. I wanna live. And I want you to live. But living means we’ve gotta live with our conscience.”

“We stay in one place too long, we die. It takes very little to find yourself dead. Death’s only too happy to come find you. Little things like this invite death and death would only be too pleased to give it to you. I want you to understand that.” He searches my eyes. “Do you understand that?”

“I understand,” I say, meaning the opposite. I’m sure he can see the insincerity in my eyes but I don’t want to argue about this anymore. I’m very confused. What’s the big rush, I want to ask him. Last time we drifted, it was a race to get to Salt Lake City because the Fireflies were waiting for us. But now? What’s the rush? None. What’s the mission? None. Who’s out to get us? No one. I don’t even know where we’re going or why. It doesn’t matter because there’s no objective.

This makes me very sad. I realize Joel’s been running from something or someone for over twenty years—the military, rogue factions, rebels, infectids. Always running. He hasn’t lived in two decades without the immediate threat of death hanging over him.

Even when there are no signs of people or civilization like houses or cooking fires, he still feels eyes everywhere, watching him. This is terrible. Imagine living like this. Living with a constant fear you’re going to be killed at any moment. He’s always looking over his shoulder. I’m surprised he doesn’t have a constant pain in his neck from always looking over his shoulder. I’m surprised he hasn’t grown a pair of eyes in the back of his head.
Chapter Four

I pull a handful of bell-shaped mushrooms from the shady forest floor and call out to Joel walking ahead. “Edible?” I ask, showing him the mushrooms in my hand. “Poisonous?”

He gestures at the tall trees. “Them’s the only ones who know. Unless you speak rabbit or squirrel or mouse, get rid of it.”

“I’m starving.”

“We don’t eat what we don’t know.”

He's right. Joel's always right. I reluctantly toss them to the ground.

We exit the timber to a small sunlit glade of rankly grass. In the middle is a rotted cabin of tightly-joined logs. No one lives here. Abandoned. The cabin’s a horror, like a murderer's hole-up. But the location’s picturesque and advantageous, set between the timber and a shallow creek. A big junk pile shows the passage of time. Cracked propane tanks, splintered furniture, broken fencing, and brittle plastic tarp.

We climb into the living room through a large hole etched in porcupine teeth-marks and sift through the garbage. The blackened ceilings are covered in old wasp hives and spider webs. I wrinkle my nose at the smell. Damp rot possesses everything and mixes with the strange sweat from the countless drifters who’ve occupied it over the decades. There’s a strong smell of lingering soot from the big open crumbled fireplace, the ashes washed down by decades of rain.

The heavy planks around the front door are covered in messages carved by drifters and vagrants who sought shelter, or rested for an hour or an entire season. Crude drawings of women and livestock, slang and curses, and rude caricatures of dicks and guns are mixed with messages left for friends, family, and enemies.

Joel says it’s time to start turning-in. All day we tried to scout a safe crossing along the river. Well, we couldn’t. We’ll wait it out a couple more days till the churning floodwaters recede. The derelict cabin’s safer than sleeping rough. I slide my pack from my shoulders, my arms numb from bearing its weight. We choose the kitchen as the safest room in the house to bed down. I sweep the floor with my feet and crush as many spiders as I can as they skitter away. We drag weathered plywood from the junk pile to cover the windows.

The sun sets and an oppressive haze settles over everything. We strip to our dirty sweaty underwear and lay shoulder-to-shoulder on a poncho liner. We use our packs for our pillows. Joel arranges his load-out between our hips. Do not cross this line, the load-out says. I wouldn’t cross that line even if I wanted to. I can smell his rankness from here. He yawns, rubs the top of his head, and scratches his armpits. He does this every night at bed down without fail.

I already know I won’t sleep well. Too hot and humid. Overpowering heat hits us with all of its cruelty. The smell of the river rises through the hot darkness. Beyond the cabin walls, the timber’s alive with chirping, hooting, and scurrying beasts. I feel a large insect skitter across my thigh. I curse and swipe it away.
“Go to sleep,” Joel says, his voice gravelled in exhaustion. “It’s been a long day.”

“I’m too hungry to sleep.”

“We’ll set out first light.”

I groan.

“No other way,” he says, his voice magnanimous. He’s too tired to lose his temper with me. He rolls toward me, raises up on an elbow, and holds his empty hand over me, his fingers bent into a funny grip.

I look at him blankly. I have no idea what he’s doing.

“Grub pile,” he says, as if it explains everything.

I don’t respond.

“Come and get it,” he says and beckons his hand insistently.

“Come and get what?” I ask.

“A sandwich.”

“A what?”

“A sandwich.”

“What kind of sandwich?”

“That there’s…peanut butter and jelly. I made it myself.”

I laugh freely. Sometimes he can be as uncomplicated as the sun. I love when he’s like this but it’s always fleeting. I realize it’s the first time I’ve laughed since Jackson and it feels damn good.

“Come and get it or I’mma eat it myself,” he says.

I take the imaginary sandwich from his hand and take a big bite of air. I do this to please him. It’s the first time he’s been in a playful mood since Jackson. It won’t last long because I’ll do or say something stupid and he’ll go right back to being angry. Just you wait.

“Well?” he asks.

“I never had one before,” I say, unsure of how to describe it. Sweet? Sour? Salty? There are millions of possibilities.

“Peanut butter and jelly never killed no one,” he says.

“It’s the best sandwich I ever had.”

“Damn straight.”

“What’s to drink?” I ask.

He swings over his hand, his fingers wrapped around an imaginary glass.

“That there’s...?” I ask.
“An ice cold glass of sweet milk.”

“Gross.”

“Suit yourself.” He pretends to drink it and makes an exaggerated ‘aah’ after he does.

I laugh. He laughs. I wish he could be like this all the time. He lays back down onto his back and adjusts his pack beneath his head. I roll onto my side to face him and study his profile through the darkness. I can make out the strong planes of his face—his jaw, his cheekbones, and his eyes. He seems pleased to have made me laugh. He’s got a faint smile on his face. He notices me looking at him and he looks back at me. He doesn’t say anything but even in the dark, I know the look on his face. ’You’d be a lot better-off sleeping than yapping, Ellie,’ this look says. 'Shut your eyes, shut your mouth, and leave me in peace. For the love of God, Ellie, please leave me alone with a couple hours of peaceful sleep!'

The thing is, I tried so hard to keep quiet today. ‘Ellie, I need you to shut your mouth so I can keep us safe,’ is what he always says when I start talking. But this place feels safe. He can’t say he needs to listen here. What’s he going to hear? The cicadas and the river water? The raccoons and foxes scavenging the undergrowth? The big cricket chirping endlessly by the window that won’t shut-up? I know he’s overwhelmed with how much I talk. I save it up all day and I feel it ready to spill out of me, like right now. “Tell me a story,” I say.

“Eat your damn sandwich and go to sleep,” he says.

“Know any poems?”

“Poems?”

“The Christmas story?”

“In August?”

On our first drift, he told me all about Christmas. He has two Christmas stories: one about Jesus and one about Santa. I like the one with Santa. He knows this. He knows I like the Santa one.

“Please?” I beg.

He sighs a sigh of conciliation. “Which one?”

“The one I like.” He knows which one I like.

“Joy to the world, peace on earth, goodwill to men—”

“Not that one!” I yell, interrupting him.

“Hush!”

“I hate that one—”

“Born in a stable in Bethlehem, He came from Heaven to earth to bring us from earth to Heaven.”

“The other one! The Santa one!”

He sighs and relents. “Every December 25th on the North Pole,” he says, “under twelve feet of snow, Santa hitches eight reindeer—”

“Eight flying reindeer—”
“Eight flying reindeer to his sled.”

“Is the sled an airplane?” I ask.

“The sled’s a sled.”

“How’s it fly?”

“Christmas miracle.”

“What color is it?”

“Your favorite color.”

“Silver, like an airplane. Did you fly?”

“A couple times.”

“Flying machines,” I say. “Man birds.”

“One of the greatest discoveries of progress, right up there with fire, the wheel, steam, coal, gunpowder, and electricity. This here drift-along would’ve taken less than six hours on a plane.”

I scoff. “The wind would’ve knocked us from the sky.”

“There were accidents, but not often.”

“What was it like?”

“Like the ground dropping away from under your feet. Like the whole world sliding out from beneath you, detached from solid earth and everything that’s a part of it, floating along through the clouds.”

“You crashed into them?”

“Clouds are like fog.”

“Did Santa only fly on Christmas?” I ask.

“I reckon he did enough flying that day to set him straight for the rest of the year. He’d land on your roof, slide down your chimney, and leave presents under the Christmas tree if you were good.”


“None of them.”

“Guns? Ammo?” I ask.

“Toys, video games, cameras, TVs, laptops—”

“Useless junk!” I yell, interrupting him. How could this be true? What kind of garbage person was Santa?

“If you were bad,” he says, “he left you a big lump of coal.”

“What an asshole!” I yell. Coal’s invaluable. “He had it all backward!”
He laughs.

“If we don’t have a house, how will Santa find us?” I ask.

“Christmas always finds you.”

“Was Christmas your favorite holiday?” I ask.

“It was.”

“‘Cause of the gifts?”

“Fellowship, kindness, brotherhood, and togetherness. The holiday spirit. And then New Year’s, when the earth turned another year old.”

“More gifts?” I ask.

“Champagne, fireworks, and a toast to hope and the new opportunities of a brand new year. Ring out the old, ring in the new.”

Keeping track of the years is dumb so I tell him. “Years are just a bunch of seasons.”

“Take it for what it’s worth. You survived another year and you’re still alive to welcome another. It was a reminder of the earth’s existence and a measure of mortality. You were thankful you made it, however tough or easy it’d been and you were glad for a fresh start.”

“What was your favorite year?” I ask.

“I ain’t saying.”

“Favorite month?” I ask.

He doesn’t respond.

“Favorite week?” I ask.

“That’ll do, Ellie.”

“Favorite day?” I ask, my voice small and obsequious.

He sighs deep. “Saturday. The first free day to relax. You woke-up feeling free without setting alarms—no bills, no appointments, no work. Monday was tough ‘cause you knew you had to go back to work. Tuesday was only good ‘cause you knew Monday was outta the way for the rest of the week. Wednesday was the midpoint between accepting the new week had started and the anticipation of ending it. Thursday you were hopeful for a good weekend and Friday you were excited because you knew Saturday was coming.”

“And Sunday?”

“Rest, relax…and try not to think about Monday.”

“And the other holidays?”

“What about them?”

“What were they?”
“Easter, Halloween, Thanksgiving, Valentine’s Day—one every month.”

“What was that last one?” I ask.

“Valentine’s Day?”

“Yeah.”

“That one was about love. You were supposed to show people how much you loved them.”

“Like how?” I ask.

“Buy them pink things shaped like hearts—chocolate, candy, roses, cards, stuffed animals.”

“That’s so stupid!” I laugh. “Who’d you do it for?”

I can feel by the way his body tenses something’s wrong. “Stop asking so many questions,” he says and rolls away from me, onto his side.
“Day’s gonna be a scorcher,” Joel says. Just as livestock can sniff-out far-brewing storms, his weather intuition’s keen. If he says today’s going to be a scorcher, it’s going to be hot as blazes.

After morning wash-up, we go scout. We want to get as far away as possible from the miserable cabin till we have to return at bed-down. We follow the stream cutting in and out of the thick timber. After a couple hours of walking, it meets a tributary arm where it widens, deepens, and flows with milky-blue glacial silt. A very peaceful beautiful safe spot. The forest meets the banks on both sides. If anyone comes upon us, we’ll be long gone in the timber before we’re spotted. We toss our packs beneath the shade of a willow tree. We lay over the bank on our stomachs and sip the clear sparkling water.

“Reckon that’s the coldest wettest water we’ve ever drank,” Joel says, splashing his face and his neck. He pulls to his feet and twists a willow sapling from a drooped mantle. He’s going to angle. It’s too hot for meat and fowl.

“Want me to bait you a hook?” I ask.

“Don’t feel like fighting,” he says. “Gotta hankering for sport.” He unsheathes his hunting knife and splits the sapling at one end, making a forked fishing spear. He strips down to his silkies and boots, and steps into the stream with his fishing spear poised. He wades toward a shaded spot of tangled roots and half-sunken logs.

He hates me talking while he angles so I hate when he angles. I watch him till I get bored, which doesn’t take long at all. This could go on for hours, I think to myself. Do you know how long it takes to spear a fish? Forever. It takes forever. All that wading and waiting. I’ll be covered in cobwebs by the time he catches anything.

“See anything?” I call out to him. “Any fish?”

“That’s enough, Ellie,” he says, his voice stern but not scolding. “I need to keep my mind on my work. It ain’t as easy as it looks.”

I can’t sit still in silence. Not in this heat. I rise and swing my pack over my shoulder, the universal sign that tells him I’m leaving. I don’t bother saying anything because I know he will. He always says something. He never lets me wander-off alone without giving him a reason and there are only two reasons to wander off alone: number one or number two. He’s not doing this to be weird or controlling. He needs to know where I’m at and what I’m doing so he can estimate how long I’ll be gone before he starts worrying and comes to find me. I can’t get mad at him for this. I know what he thinks when I don’t come back when I’m supposed to. That I’ve fallen and broken my leg. That I’ve been abducted and raped. That I’ve been shot and left to die on some lonesome field.

Here’s the thing. Sometimes I need privacy. Privacy to play with myself. If I ignore it, it always comes out in my sleep. I wake-up with the memory of these dreams fresh in my head, the dull ache between my thighs, and our poncho liner twisted-up all around me. When I wake-up like this, I always find Joel wandering out of earshot, walking around in circles, pretending to scavenge tinder we don’t need. For the first half of the day after I have these dreams, he gets absent-minded and
preoccupied. Like, he doesn’t answer me on the first address so I have to keep addressing him again and again.

If he needs privacy for himself, I wouldn’t know it. He must have the same urges as me. The same ache between his legs that needs to be fucked away. How could he not? I think about this. Joel playing with himself. I picture his big hairy hand wrapped around his big dick, squeezing and stroking, and making soft pleased sounds, and it sucks the breath out of me. I feel the blood rush to my face. I wonder what he thinks about when he plays with himself. Does he ever think about me? Why should I care? I don’t know why I should care but I do. During our first drift, I never had a second thought about what was between Joel’s legs, or what he did or didn’t do with it. What’s changed? Why now? Is it something different in me? Or with him?

I start ambling a downstream path. My shoulders draw in on themselves, anticipating his voice at my back. I can almost feel his muscles gathering up to speak. Here it comes.

“Ellie,” he calls at my back. “Where’re you fixing on going?”

“Nowhere.”

“Well, you ain’t going nowhere alone.” He starts wading in my direction.

I tug at my pack straps. How do I tell him? What do I tell him? Even if he were the type of person I could speak plainly to about these things, what would I say? Listen, Joel, sometimes all I can think about is how much I need a man to throw me beneath him, spread my legs wide, and fuck me till my twat bursts open. Fill my whole body with his fucking and fuck his come deep inside me, over and over, till I’m totally fucked out. My whole body burns with impatience. I’d do anything for a cock to rub away the ache between my legs. “It’s personal,” I say.

He clears his throat nervously. He gets it. I know he won’t let his mind grasp exactly what’s so personal to me but he understands my coded language just like I understand his. “Then I ain’t interested,” he says. “Don’t go rushing into trouble, you hear? Stay close.”

I wander downstream till I come to a small meadow of thistle, comfrey, and milkweed. I find an enormous raspberry bushel. I swat away the bees and pick handfuls of berries. I set them into a large glossy lily pad shaped into a bowl. By the time I’ve filled the bowl, my hands are a sticky mess, and my clothes are covered in burrs and red juice. I find a nice sunny grassy patch cutting along the stream. I strip down to my underwear and bathe over the rocky drop-off. I drape my wet clothes over a bush and find a shady spot beneath a stately river birch while I wait for them to dry, lounging in my damp undies.

I snack on the berries and watch the tranquil water flow by, similar to the feeder streams at Jackson. I think about my time there and the night of the flood. Joel and I never talk about what happened that night. Never. These things have to be confronted. They do. If I wait for Joel to bring it up, I’ll be a skeleton lying in a grave. I know he knows I killed Eve. I’m sure of this. And he knows I saw him kill his brother. I was there. None of this is good so we choose to ignore it.

I know Tommy tried to kill me. I know this. So what. I don’t have to be reminded. I’ll never forget that night as long as I live. If I were a man, Joel would’ve probably killed me for killing Eve. Tommy came to kill me because he didn’t abide by the same rules of conduct as his brother. I understand why he did it and now that the shock has passed, I’m deeply pained by his loss. It’s torturous to think about him. I think about him being gone forever and the void it’s left, and it burns something out of me.

I’m finding it hard to accept he’s gone. He was a necessary person. He meant so much to so many
people. I could be struck-off this earth and no one would blink an eye. Tommy was needed in this world. He was too vibrant and too big to die. Joel took him away from me. He deprived me and the world of him. I’m struck by a great emptiness, bottomless and infinite. He was magnetic. His appeal was vital and physically raw. I miss his alert serene eyes and his reckless manner. Sex with him stopped the chaotic turn of the world for a brief moment. It felt like the two of us, alone, united against everyone and everything against us.

In a strange way, Joel brings me comfort. I can’t help but think of Tommy when I look at him. I recognize a lot of similar qualities between them. Brothers, you know. Joel can do anything a man can do, and he can do it better than anyone else I know. There’s a greatness about him. He thrives on a keen sense of justice and retaliates only to settle fair grievances.

But beneath my admiration, I resent him. He chose Eve over me. I hate even thinking of her name. Her name feels like garbage in my mouth. When Joel left me behind for her, it went against every honorable principle that’d earned my admiration, respect, and loyalty. Where was his sense of responsibility and obligation to me? He was evasive and aloof. He rejected his role as my guardian. He abandoned me for a rival. It’s made me bitter, self-contemptuous, critical, and insecure.

I crave confrontation and seek answers but I’d never ask him. He’d never tell me anyway. His silence’s worse than anything. It’s his worst weapon against me. For all his virtues and good sportsmanship, his flaws are glaring. He’s shown himself as disloyal, dishonest, and evasive. I long for vindication. I want to see him deeply humiliated, undignified, and distressed. I want to strip him of his free will and punish him for what he’s done—and I know just how I’d do it.

I lay back and cradle my head in my arms. The grass tickles my shoulders. I rub the top of my head, massaging my scalp. I slip my fingers beneath my underwear waistband and slowly tug them off. I spread my legs wide, slip a hand between my thighs, and let myself slowly open-up against my fingers as I cue-up a fantasy.
Joel approaches over the sunlit grassy plain. I’m still in my damp undies, waiting for my wet clothes to dry. The sun shines at his back with his face dark in shadow. I know it’s him from his self-possessed swaggering gait, bobbing in the big long shadow stretched before him. He’s stripped to the waist with dark patches around the crotch of his jeans from his wet silkies below. He must’ve just finished spearfishing upstream because he holds the willow fishing spear limp in his hand.

“I reckoned on finding you here,” he says when he comes within earshot.

“It’s impossible to hide from you,” I tease.

“You weren’t trying to hide from me, were you?” he asks, playing along.

“I was looking for you, anyway.”

“Something’s the matter?”

“I wanna talk.”

I feel his manner changing. His muscles close-in on themselves. He hates confrontations. He hates surprises. He lays down his pack and his fishing spear, and sits next to me. “What’s on your mind, Ellie?”

“I’ve been thinking about a lotta things,” I say.

“Take your time. No rush. We’ll settle them.”

“I wanna talk about Jackson. The night it fell. What happened?”

“Cloudbursts. Dams couldn’t hold.”

“I know. What happened at the Vale?”

“I reckon you’re gonna be mighty disappointed ‘cause my memory ain’t so strong on none of that.”

“You remember,” I say. “I can see it in your eyes.”

He drops his eyes. “I reckon I’ve clean forgot.”

“Then I guess it’s settled,” I say, my voice acidic and my manner cold. Silence hangs uncomfortably until I break it. “So I guess you didn’t know Maria came and tried to kill me?”

I feel his manner shifting, becoming agitated. “Ellie, what are you talking about?”

“I just told you. She came to the powerhouse and tried to kill me. Gold shot her dead before she could pop-off the shot.”

“Are you sure that’s what happened?”
“Unlike you, I remember everything,” I say facetiously.

“Go on, speak your piece.”

“She said I was a snake, and said she wasn’t gonna let no snake bite and get away with it. She said she knew Tommy and I were fucking, knew I killed Eve, and said everything evil that happened in Jackson was my fault.”

His eyes shift in bursts, taking it all in.

“Now it only seems fair to tell me what happened with you,” I say.

“I reckon,” he says, his voice soft and relenting.

“I want the whole story and I want it all.”

“Then I suppose I’ve gotta tell you.” He plucks distractedly at the grass with one hand. “She died in agony, cursing like the Devil, begging to be saved, shrieking like a soul burning in Hell. She hollered at me, hollered at Tommy, and hollered at Gold—accused him of hiding some sorta magic cure from her. Magic stones. She accused Tommy of taking a shine to you. She begged him to kill you for what you’d done—she was dead-set on settling the score. She accused Maria of letting herself go and making Tommy’s eye wander, of not having their own kids to keep him from straying off, and of pushing-off the responsibility of an heir onto her. Of her being a useless housekeeper, of not keeping herself up, and of not taking interest in Tommy’s work. She accused me of lying ‘cause I couldn’t save her, of conspiring with you to kill her, and of not caring she was dying. ‘Now you can go back to your bachelor ways,’ she hollered. ‘Go back to Boston, go back to your true love, Tess, and go back to playing daddy to that feral little brat.’

“After she finished hollering and accusing, she got lonesome for begging. ‘Don’t leave me alone to die, Joel! Don’t leave me where it’s cold and dark and full of nothing. Come with me and we’ll be together forever.’ Her lip was all mangled-up—her words came out all wrong. She was spitting blood and slobbering all over herself like a rabid coyote. Maria held her down and soothed her the best she could, till she bit her arm. Then she backed herself up into a corner with Tommy’s carving knife and started slicing-off her own lip—sliced past her chin and severed the artery deep. There was nothing else to be done. Gold finished the job. We helped hold her down. It wasn’t pretty. She died in agony, cursing your name.”

We both stare at the water in silence. I start processing what he said and a smug smile draws-up my lips. I’m pleased to know I caused her so much agony as she laid dying. I feel no remorse in killing her. She should’ve known. I tried to warn her and she didn’t listen. She knew I’d kill her if she didn’t go away and leave me and Joel alone. Why didn’t she just leave him alone? Did she want to die? I suppose she must’ve wanted to die. Leave him alone, I yelled at her silently whenever I saw her. Well, she should’ve known how dangerous I was. She should’ve left him alone, left us all alone.

“So that’s what you wanted to know, ain’t it?” he asks.

“That’s what I wanted to know,” I say.

“Well now you know.”

I laugh harshly and mirthlessly. “Good,” I say. “I wanted her to know who killed her and that the girl who killed her knew exactly what she did to deserve it.”

He sniffs contemptuously. “Well, look at the change in you. Smiling ‘cause someone died in
agonies, in front of their own kin. You’re overjoyed!”

“No one would blame me for doing it.”

“You’re wrong and you know it.”

“I’m sorry I only had one chance to kill her. If she had a hundred lives, I would’ve taken them all. I hate her. And I hate you for falling for her.”

“So why didn’t you kill me, too?”

“I wanted keep you alive so that one day, I’ll have the chance to punish you for what you’ve done.”

“Is that a threat?” he asks.

“A threat’s only as good as the chance to make good on it—and you’d better believe I will. I’m gonna bend you over and thrash you for what you’ve done, Joel Miller!”

He laughs, loud and free. “I reckon your imagination’s gotten the best of you, Ellie.”

I seethe anger, my whole body stiffening-up with rage. What’s wrong with me, I ask myself. What kind of person am I? What kind of person’s jealous of a dead woman? I am. I’m jealous of a dead woman. I despise myself for being like this but I can’t help it. I don’t even have to compete with her anymore but I still do. She’s dead. Dead and gone. The dead get buried and what’s below the earth’s quickly forgotten. How can you take revenge on the dead? What’s it matter? Will I always feel like this? Threatened and jealous of a dead woman? God, I hope not.

He notices my agitation and it pleases him. “Riled, yeah?” he sneers.

I don’t respond, seething anger.

“Just spit-out whatever you’ve gotta say, Ellie.”

“Did you ever stop to think about how I felt?” I yell. “You abandoned me! You betrayed me! After I was so loyal to you! Is it ‘cause you hate me? Were you ashamed of me? Were you trying to punish me because I was always acting-up? You made me look like a fool!”

“Well, now,” he says, his voice contrite. “I’m awful sorry you’re thinking like that. I wasn’t trying to make a fool outta you.”

“Well, you did. You treated me like a diversion, like a little hobby you could pick-up and throw away when you got bored. I’m giving you a chance to come clean, Joel. Tell me the truth or get the punishment you deserve.”

“I already said my piece.”

“So, punishment?”

He sighs exasperation. “You’re wanting the truth about what?”

“Why’d you leave me behind for her?”

“It couldn’t be helped. It had to be done.”

“If that’s true, why didn’t you tell me?”
“I figured you’d hear about it soon enough.”

“Bullshit! It’s not like you to evade responsibility. You made Gold do it for you, you coward!”

Blood boils my veins. My face flushes red with the certainty he won’t take responsibility for his betrayal or his abandonment. He won’t tell me the truth and he won’t apologize. I strike-out in anger. I can practically feel my tongue forking as I yell. “She didn’t love you, you know! She was in love with the idea of you! Couldn’t you see that? She was incapable of love. You know I’m right.”

His face darkens and his eyes harden with bitter scorn. This tells me I’m starting to get to him so I dig deeper. “She played you for a fool. She spread lies about you. She gossiped about you behind your back. To everyone—Gold, Tommy—even to me. She called you a stray. A backslider. Said you did nothing but mope around all day and do work that wasn’t fit for a real man, a man like your brother. She told me she never really liked you in the way she led you to believe, that she’d rather be engaged to a real man. A real man like Tommy.”

His lips pull into a thin bitter line. “Maybe she was running me down,” he says. “But you can’t say she wasn’t clever at handing it to folks.”

“She never loved you!” I yell. “She never cared about you! She just wanted to prove she could take you away from me—and you fell for it! She was stringing you along! It was all a game to her!”

“If it was,” he says, “that was her own business. And if you weren’t so jealous, you’d see she wasn’t so bad.”

“Jealous?” I scramble to my feet and menace over him. “Fuck you, Joel! You’ve got no right!”

He pulls to his feet and squares in front of me. “Well, I’m taking the right, I reckon. Now I’m telling you this, Ellie. When everything comes out, you’ll see it ain’t like that.”

“What the fuck are you waiting for?” I yell, incredulous. Why won’t he just tell me the truth? Does he think I can’t handle it? Does he not respect me? No truth could be worse than his lies and evasiveness.

“I’ve already tried to tell you every-which-way without saying it to your face,” he says. “I figured you knew and I figured you cared.”

“The only person I cared about was Tommy! He was there for me when you weren’t! He gave me the discipline you were too soft to give me. I love him—and I hate you!”

He draws-in a sharp breath. It takes a moment for him to respond, and when he does, his voice is injured and quiet. “Well, I suppose there’s been a mix-up, a big mistake somewhere. I reckon there’s no use trying to straighten it out now. You wouldn’t believe me anyway.”

“Why would I believe the words of a liar?” I ask.

He bridges his hands to his hips and looks at me hard. This look says he’s reached his limit. “You’re making this too damn important, Ellie. I didn’t give a damn then and I don’t give a damn now! Maybe it’s something you oughta know—we ain’t arguing that. There’ll come a day when we’ll talk real serious about it and I’ll tell you why I’d done what I did, but for now, I’ve spoken my piece. That ends it. It’s over!”

“It’s far from over, Joel,” I say. “I’m gonna hold you accountable for your lies. I’m gonna give you the punishment you deserve.”
“I reckon you don’t need to punish me, Ellie. Your words have already hurt me enough.”

I laugh bitterly. “I meant everything I said!”

“Then I reckon there’s nothing more to say. You know deep-down in your heart I ain’t the liar you think I am. I tried to show you but I suppose it’s too late for you to understand I’m being sincere.”

He’s done. He bends toward his pack to pick it up.

Before he can get it, I kick it out of his reach, grab the willow spear, and brandish it toward him, threatening him. “You’ve been playing a pretty slick game with me, Joel, but you’re not as slick as you think you are.”

He rubs his chin with the back of his hand. “I don’t know what you’re getting at, Ellie.”

“You’ve had your way for too long,” I say. “I’ve been waiting for this moment for a long time. I’m gonna teach you a lesson you’ll never forget.”

“You’re presuming a lot if you think—”

“You’ll get no mercy here,” I say, interrupting him. “I’m gonna break you, Joel Miller.”

He laughs nervously. “Well, if you think you can handle it, go right ahead.”

“When’s the last time you were thrashed, Joel?”

“Not since I was a little boy.”

“I don’t know how you got away with it for so long. You deserve everything that’s coming to you. Take off your jeans and your underwear.”

He laughs nervously. “What’s this here?”

“Take everything off or I’ll take it off for you,” I say, my voice authoritative, my eyes steady, and my jaw determined. He searches my eyes. I see him thinking about this, weighing all the options in his head. After a long moment, he chooses. He walks to a large felled oak tree and sits on it like a bench.

I stand before him and bend the willow in my hands—flexible, slender, and lightweight. I whisk it through the air, swishing a clean malicious whistle. Soaked in water from his spearing expedition, it’s supple and snappy, with the whip-like reflex of a riding crop.

He tracks the whip with solemn eyes and grips his right hand with his left, alternating the left with the right. “If it’s not too late, Ellie, I’d like to apologize.”

“I don’t want your damn apologies,” I say. “I want the truth.”

“Well, I ain’t feeling talkative right now and you know explanations don’t come natural to me.”

“Then listen-up ‘cause here’s your punishment. You get twelve lashes for disobedience. Six on each cheek, on your bare skin. And you’ll count after each lash.”

“With the whip?” he asks, his voice soft.

“My hand’s too light for what you deserve. You’ll find no sympathy here.”

“I wasn’t asking for your pity.”
“Well you wouldn’t get it anyway. I told you I was gonna get even with you. Take everything off and bend over the log.”

“We don’t have to do this, Ellie.”

“I have to do this. You don’t have to do anything but lay there and take it.”

He doesn’t move nor speak.

“If you aren’t bent over that log with your ass in the air and your underwear down at your ankles by the time I count to three, you’ll get double. One...two...three.”

He turns away from me and slowly strips down till he’s naked. He drapes himself over the log with his pale bottom arched high, holding himself up from the ground by his arms. He pins his knees together, and clenches his ass cheeks and thighs, etched in lean firm muscle. I come behind him and stand on his left side. He stares straight ahead, his entire head blushed deep pink from his neck to his ears.

“Spread your legs,” I say and flick the backs of his thighs with the whip. “Don’t let those thighs touch.”

“Ellie—”

“Any more back talk’s an extra lash.”

“Ellie—”

“One extra lash! You want more?”

He spreads his legs wide until they’re hip-width apart.

“Ass higher—higher than your face. Lift-up on your toes.”

He hoists his bottom higher, the flesh pulling tight and smooth across each pale cheek, exposing the head of his cock and his balls, drawn-up tightly between his thighs.

Before I start, I want to take a practice swing. To measure the distance and to calibrate my aim. I press the whip across the center of his bottom where his cheeks crest. I swing-back my arm and tap the whip gently against his flesh, testing the sensation. He winces as it makes contact with his skin, his bottom clenched and his whole body quivering.

“Not my balls, Ellie,” he says.

“We’ll see about that,” I say. “Two extra lashes—no more back talk.”

“Ellie, not my balls.”

“Three extra! I’m warning you, Joel. If you move or speak again without permission, that’s an extra lash. And if you don’t count-off each blow, that’s another extra lash.”

He takes a deep breath and holds it, his whole body trembling. I square over my heels, toss back my arm, and bring the whip down hard and swift, burying it into the fleshy crest of his right cheek. Crack! The whip bounces back and leaves a stark white line between two blossoming red ridges. His bottom lurches and after a split second, he gasps. “One,” he says, his voice soft.

I wait for the fresh bright pain to seep through his body before striking again, the whip aimed an
inch above the first lash. Crack! He sucks-in his breath with a sharp hiss followed by a strangled
grunt, his body straining and his head jolting upright. A thin white mark etches his skin before
filling-in red. “Two,” he says, breathless.

I’m out for blood. I want to hurt him as badly as he hurt me, beat him till he’s broken and
denigrated. I want him to beg me for mercy and clemency, and plead for my forgiveness through
tears, full of remorse, promising never to be disloyal again.

I raise my arm high with my elbow bent and the tip of the whip touching my shoulder. I rise-up on
my toes and spring forward, twisting from the hips. Crack! The powerful stroke bites into the full
meat of his shiny red ass cheek, an inch higher than the last one. He gasps and choke-backs a wail,
his head jerking, his bottom thrashing, and his leg kicking-out. “Three!” he yells through deep
quick breath.

By the fifth lash, I’ve carved five parallel lines across his right cheek, spaced an inch apart, raised
against the shiny red tight skin of his bottom. On the sixth, I pivot my wrist and slash diagonally
across the first five cuts, slicing a thick fresh weal through them and firing them back up.

“How many, Joel?” I ask, noticing he’d stopped counting.

“Six!” he yells. He chokes-back a wail and starts panting like a dog.

“Learning your lesson?” I ask.

He knows better than to answer me and risk another lash for back talk. He gasps anguish, his hips
bucking against the log, and his ass cheeks clenching and unclenching.

I stand on his opposite side and move onto his left ass cheek, lashing him in the same order and
fashion as the right. After each fresh cut, he wails and thrusts-up his ass, thrashing his hips wildly
from side to side, and straining-up on his toes. His cock grows thicker and longer past his drawn-up
balls. His whole body’s shiny in sweat. An ache fires-up my thighs and I feel myself starting to get
wet between my legs. I spring-up on my toes and strike with vengeance, raising my arm higher and
higher with each stroke. I wait half-a-minute between each one to let the fiery burn penetrate his
whole body.

After the twelve lashes are dealt, I gather my breath momentarily before the final three for back
talk. He begs me to stop and struggles to rise from the log.

I drive down his shoulders and speak right into his ear. “You stay in position till we’re done.” I
flick the backs of his clenched thighs with the lash. “Spread them good and wide.” I wait for him to
spread his legs wider and when he does, I warn him, “These are really gonna hurt, Joel. Take them
good.”

I swing-back the whip and spring forward from my toes. Crack! I strike the delicate tender
sensitive skin of his inner thigh where it meets his ass cheek, right where he sits, so for the next
week, he’ll think of his punishment every time he takes a seat. The whip curls around his thigh,
etching a long thin fresh lash across his flesh. He howls. His whole body shudders and he whips his
head from side to side.

I wind-back my arm, pivot my wrist, and strike the identical spot on the opposite thigh. Crack! The
tip of the whip fans the back of his balls. He wails in agony, strains up on his toes, and thrashes his
bottom fiercely, begging me to stop.

“Last one!” I yell and twist at the hips. Crack! I strike the tender skin stretched across his balls at
the root of his cock. His head jerks up and he bellows torment to the sky.

I toss down the whip, breathless. “Punishment’s over,” I say. “You can get up.”

He reaches for his bottom and touches it gently, wincing in pain. Deep cuts crisscross his skin, ridged in red, black, and blue weals. He pulls himself from the log and sits back down on it cautiously, like he’s perching a bench. His face carries an injured pained look, defenseless and vulnerable. I’ve broken him. It’s done. He buries his face in his hands. He takes a couple shuddering breaths, his shoulders spasming.

Pity washes over me. I go over to him and sit myself down on the ground between his legs. I lay my head on his thigh like a dog and look up at him but he keeps his hands over his face. I stay like this for a while, looking up at him, but he acts like I’m not here, so I remind him. I touch his legs and feel them up, running my fingernails over his thighs. Nothing. I sit up on my heels, lead his thighs wider apart, and move in closer. He lets me do this.

I look at his cock. It sits-up high, hard, and thick from his lap, ready to fuck. I take it in my hand and squeeze my fingers around it. He draws-in a sharp breath. His cock is twice as big as anything I’ve ever seen so I hold it in both hands. I squeeze it until the tip bulges, and his shaft surges thicker, tighter, and longer against my fingers.

He takes his hands away from his face and looks at me directly. “For God’s sake, Ellie,” he says, exasperated. “Are you just gonna sit there all day strangling the life outta it? Put it in your mouth and suck on it!”

I slip my body against him and strip-off my bra and panties. He takes me by the waist, kisses my belly, and pushes my breasts against my chest with the flat of his hands. They completely disappear beneath his big warm palms. He rubs his face against them, nipping and licking my nipples. He feels my navel, running his finger into it. He slides his fingers over my twat and I swing my thighs wide open. He runs a finger into the split and squeezes the lips. I cling to his thighs, moving my hips like I’m slowly fucking him, making soft pleased sounds. I spread my legs wider and watch his finger slip into my little hole, watch it stretch and close over his finger as he pushes it a bit deeper.

My whole body’s on fire. His cock’s right here and I need it in my mouth. I need to taste him, need to taste his come at its richest and thickest. I want to suck everything out of his cock, suck him till his balls are turned inside out, and swallow them whole with his cock.

He slips out his finger from my twat. I gasp and keep moving my hips like I’m slowly fucking him. He runs his wet finger into my mouth and I taste myself on his skin. I lick his finger and suck it clean. His whole body’s burning up and his eyes are glassed-over. I kneel between his knees and rub my breasts against his balls, teasing him. “You still owe me an apology,” I say.

“I’m apologizing,” he says, his voice thick in his throat. “I’m thanking you, Ellie. For everything. I deserved it.”

“Next time you lie to me, I’ll punish you again.”

“Promise me,” he says with a faint smile. He takes my hand and leads it to his cock. He watches me as I take it in my hand, wrap my fingers around it, and squeeze it tight. I dig my other hand into his bush—dark, sweaty, and thick—and I tickle his balls. I rub the tip across my nipples, rub it across my lips, and over my nose and chin, looking at him. He exhales brightly, the muscles of his abdomen contracting.
I kiss and lick his belly and thighs, and lay my face against his bush, breathing-in his musk and sweat. He can’t sit still. He’s close to the point of begging. Begging for me to put his cock in my mouth. I tease him a little bit longer until I feel his muscles gathering-up like he’s going to jump out of his seat and I know I’ve got him good. He doesn’t want to play anymore. “I wanna be sucked,” he begs. “I want you to suck me.”

I open my mouth as wide as it goes, slip-in the tip, and lather it up, bobbing my head. He gasps and pushes against my face, urging himself deeper. I feel his hands in my hair, digging around the roots. He draws-back handfuls and watches my face as I slobber over his cock. He reaches for one of my breasts and takes a nipple between his fingers, rolling and tugging.

I pop him out of my mouth, fit my head into his lap, and fuck him slowly with my slippery hand. “I could suck your dick all day and night,” I say.

“Put it back in your mouth and show me,” he says.

I slip his cock back into my mouth and start to slowly suck it. Soon enough, his breath alters and he goes very quiet. I feel like he’s going to come but I don’t want him to come yet, so I ease him from my mouth. He whimpered in protest and begs me to put it back in. I slip the head back into my mouth and hold it between my lips. I take his balls into my other hand and tickle them. I pop his cock out of my mouth, squeeze it in my hand, and look up at him. He takes his cock from my hand and holds it in his own. He’s ready to explode and he wants to do it his own way. He struggles to his feet. He grabs me by the back of the head, and rubs his cock and balls all over my face. He tells me to open my mouth wider than I’ve ever opened it before and to keep it wide open.

I open my mouth as I can, and he tries to put himself in. It’s a tight fit. He squeezes-in the head and fucks the rest of himself into my mouth till there’s nothing outside my mouth but his balls and his bush. I retch but I bring nothing up. He pulls himself out completely and does it again, ramming himself into my mouth till his shaft’s buried down my throat. I retch-up his cock. He holds me by the back of my head and fucks my mouth, smothering me with his cock. I lick his bush while I’ve got him in my mouth. His balls slap wetly against my chin. I bring-up mouthfuls of thick saliva, his thighs soaked to the knees in it. All I hear are the filthy slobbering sounds of my cock-sucking and my fierce retching.

It doesn’t take much longer till he lets go and he fills my mouth with hot sprays of come. I swallow him back, thick and rich, full of the strong taste of his cock. He keeps coming loads. Coming by the gallon. I suck and swallow. There’s so much come, it starts spraying out of my nose as he fucks it down my throat. He’s soaked in come from his belly to his knees. My whole chest’s coated in cockfuls of his come. I keep sucking and swallowing, sucking and swallowing. He’s never going to stop coming. Neither am I.
Joel’s still spearfishing when I get back to our shaded spot beneath the willow tree. He hasn’t caught anything. If he had, his fresh kill would’ve been stacked on the bank wrapped in neat packages of wet fern fronds. He’s that meticulous and predictable.

I sit myself down on a mossy patch beneath the willow tree and watch him. Turtles slip from half-sunken logs and paddle through the eelgrass dotted with small snails. He lowers his spear into the water and jabs swiftly. The water agitates and boils below. After a moment, he pulls-up a quivering chubby striped yellow perch. A beautiful fish. He wades over to where I’m sitting, keeping his fingers hooked beneath its red gill plate and its snub-nosed head submerged below the waterline.

“Just bring him up,” I say, wondering why he’s going so slow.

“I wanna land him, not lose him,” he says. “You gotta keep ‘em deep, keep ‘em quiet.” He hoists onto the bank, takes out his knife, and cuts the fish where its head meets its body.

“That’s the finest fish I ever saw,” I say. “Gimme your knife.” He knows the only reason I’m asking for his knife is so I can field-dress his kill. I’m doing this to be polite, not because I feel like playing with fish guts. It only seems proper after he spent all afternoon fishing.

“Don’t want no tore-up roe sack,” he says, rebuffing my offer. He slits the fish from its tail to its gills. “Never eat the roe or liver of a fish you don’t know. Could make you real sick.” He pops out the roe sack. He’s going to make me split it with him. He always makes me eat it while we’re drifting. Minerals, you know. To ward off scurvy, goiters, and rickets. The crises are endless.

“How do you know it’s poisonous or not?” I ask.

“Wicked eyes and cruel mouths. The shape’ll be off. Scales, rough and spiny. Or thorny. Or smooth without scales, with soft bristles. The jaw’s more like a turtle or a bird, with no teeth.”

I stare senselessly, entranced by the sound of the twinkling stream and tranquilized by the heat. I stare until I hear him calling my name. I look at him, dazed.

“Ain’t you hearing me?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I say, meaning the opposite.

“What’d I just say?”

“Don’t eat the roe if you don’t know the fish.”

A muscle twitches at the base of his jaw. This clearly isn’t the answer he was looking for. I spaced-out. So what. “Tell me why I should bother teaching you things if you ain’t gonna pay no mind?” he asks.

“Because you’ll always be here for me. To show me how to do stuff.”

“Is that a fact?”
“You taught me everything. Like a father.”

“Go on,” he says. He flips over the blade and nudges the handle toward me. “Show me how good I taught you.”

He gets up and ambles downstream, in the opposite direction. What’s this? Where’s he going? I wipe the knife clean across my thigh and use it as a mirror, watching his reflection in the blade. He stops about thirty feet away and stares out at the water. Melancholy weighs his eyes, vacant and staring. He crouches over the bank, dips a hand into the water, and smears dripping handfuls across his face, gasping and sputtering.

I scrape out the fish’s liver and swim bladder. “Should I rip out the gills?” I ask, aiming my voice toward him.

He comes back over and crouches at my side. “I’ve got it,” he says, his voice and manner soft. I hand him the blade. He slices the fish’s gill attachments and carves gristle from its spine. “Never told you much about my dad, yeah?” he asks, not waiting for an answer. “He was a big man, stern and silent. He feared no one and made no threats or promises he didn’t intend to keep. There was little tenderness in him—not for us, our mama, or his kin. He had little thought beyond mastering his obligations, but he was honest and a hard worker.

“We were raised with discipline, brought-up strict with a strong belief in family structure, with him as the unquestionable head of the household. Master after God. We always knew what was expected of us. Respect our elders, good manners, and be kind to our family and friends. We learned how to be individuals and how to stand on our own two feet. He didn’t have a good fatherly role model growing up but he tried to be the best damn father he could. I learned everything I could from him. How to change a tire, lay down masonry, shingle a roof, mend a fence, bait a hook, hunt a blind, build a fire, pitch a fastball, throw a punch, take a punch, and walk-off a broken heart.”

I love when he tells me stories about his childhood. Stories from before I knew him. From before I was born. It makes me feel closer to him. “Did you teach that stuff to Sarah?” I ask.

He tugs on his earlobe and speaks softly, his voice reticent. “Things were different, Ellie. I had to keep a roof over our heads. Wasn’t much time for nothing else.” He hooks his fingers into the fish’s gill plate, steps into the stream, and rinses it off below the water. “Growing-up, there wasn’t a single day I came through the back door shouting, ‘Mama, I’m home!’ and there wasn’t an answer. I wanted the same thing for Sarah. Not coming home to a note taped to the fridge.”

“You mom sounds nice,” I say, hoping that’s how mothers should be described. I suppose mothers are supposed to be nice. Like teachers. Kind happy women who help you learn things and look after you while you’re at school. Who show you where to sit, play, and take a nap. Who tell you the names of the other kids and where your own mother will be when she picks you up at the end of the day. Or maybe they’re not supposed to be nice? Maybe they’re supposed to be stern. Disciplinarians. How should I know?

“She was no-nonsense,” he says. “Patient. Avoided fights but she always got her way. She fixed everything without asking for thanks. She didn’t care for small matters and stood for integrity but when her sense of justice got violated, the offender was likely to never forget.” He speaks about her without nostalgia, melancholy, or reverence. Just a sense of deep respect. If I ever had kids, I’d hope they’d speak about me in the same way after I was long gone.

He boosts onto the bank and lays the perch over the moss. He picks-up the ovary sack and rips it open in his palm. He scoops some ripe eggs onto his finger and draws it up to my mouth. “Come
“I’m good.” I say, hoping he just drops it, hoping he doesn’t insist.

He comes closer, his finger and manner insistent. “Thems was a delicacy in the Old World.”

“Eaten off a finger?” I laugh.

“Well, that depended on how hungry or how rich you were.” He draws his finger beneath my nose. “Go on, grind it down.”

“What if it’s poisonous?”

“I ain’t asking you to run any risk I ain’t running myself. Quit dawdling and take your medicine.”

It’s too hot to fight over this. Too hot to have it out. I take his hand by his wrist and draw it under my nose. I smell it, which is a mistake because it smells like seasickness. Like something went bad in the ocean, got eaten, was puked-up, and was left to decay on the shore, rotting in the sun. How could something smell so bad and be so good for me? It doesn’t make any sense. I stick out my tongue and flick it against the roe, taking a tiny drop into my mouth. Brine. Brine and seasickness. Big mistake. The only way to get this load down without throwing it up is to swallow it back like a strong dose of medicine, to take his finger into my mouth as far back as it’ll go and swallow it before the flavor hits my tongue. Before I can taste the seasickness. That’s what I decide to do, so I start doing it. I run his finger into my mouth as far as it’ll go without triggering my gag reflex and I suck-off the roe, cleaning-off his finger with the back of my tongue. I look at him as I do this.

He doesn’t notice me looking at him. Not at first, because his eyes are so glassed-over, I’m not even sure he knows who I am or where he is. His face blushes deep crimson from his forehead to his neck. I’ve never seen him blush before. Joel never blushes. I think of all the times he should’ve blushed and didn’t. His expression’s hopeless, like he’s pleading for something, like a man dying of thirst watching another man drink a tall glass of clear cold water.

He looks at me and we look into each other’s eyes, and the world stops for a second. This is a feeling between us. My breath comes fast in my chest and the blood drains from my face. I start picturing all sorts of wicked filthy things that should never cross my mind about him. Digging around his fly till his cock springs out and begging him to fuck himself between my legs, to fill me with his fucking till he explodes in my twat. Get away from that, you wicked girl, I tell myself. I ease-out his finger and gag theatrically, like the whole thing’s a big joke. I spit to the ground.

“Tastes like it’s gonna colonize my intestines!” I laugh, and wipe my mouth dramatically with the back of my hand. Listen, I couldn’t even tell you what the roe actually tasted like. I’m too overcome with what just happened to know anything else. What matters is this feeling between us. Was it always there, just beneath the surface? Or is it something new? I’m not imaging it. I know this as a fact. I was there. I felt it. I liked seeing this look on his face. I liked taunting and teasing him. It feels like playing with fire, or a rattlesnake, or something equally lethal and reckless. Why? Because no person on this earth has the power to do it but me, I realize.

“I ain’t grieving none,” he mumbles. He won’t look at me. He can’t look at me. He keeps his head low and his eyes to the ground. I feel a terrible tension between us. It feels like there's poison between us. He gestures at the perch. “Go on, wrap that up.”

He steps back into the creek till he’s waist-deep. He was just in the water for an hour and he went right back in. Why do you suppose he did this? I don’t know because I can’t see his face. He stands with his back to me, and makes a big show of sluicing water over his face and chest. Gasping,
sputtering, and splashing. I rip-up a handful of ferns, soak them in the water, and encase the perch in its cool wet leaves.

He lays back on the grassy bank, his weight pitched over his elbows, and his legs stretched-out and crossed at the ankles. He plucks idly at the grass and meditates the water. The tension’s broken. We’re okay. I grab handfuls of sedge from the creek’s edge, and pick laurels and buttercups from the grass. I sit at his side, peel-off my boots and socks, and rub my sweaty feet over the soft warm moss. He lays back and slings an arm over his eyes. I braid the sedge and flowers into a crown, and slide it onto my head.

“What were you like as a boy?” I ask. “When you were little.”

“Growing up was hard,” he says.

“Harder than now?”

“Different.”

“Good different or bad different?”

“Just different.”

“You did this stuff for fun?”

“Do what now?”

“Camping?” I ask. “Fishing?”

He sits up and drapes his arms over his tented legs. “My dad was an angler, at his best with trout. When we were little, he took us fishing. Every spring—Matagorda, the Gulf Coast. My first blood was every angler’s dream. My hook had just touched the water and the bait had barely sunk when something big and sleek glided under the boat. The reel whirled and clicked, and the line ran like spitfire—almost yanked my arms clean outta their sockets. I braced myself and grabbed onto my rod for dear life with both hands.

“It was a tarpon, a silver king. A five-footer. Fifty pounds, half my weight. He leapt eight feet clear of the water with his mouth wide open and started towing us downstream, heading for his favorite hiding spot. I fought for more than an hour till my arms were aching and my hands were torn-up. Just a thin line between me and defeat. I still don’t know how the rod didn’t snap in half or how I didn’t get yanked overboard. There wasn’t a single muscle in my body that didn’t find out what it’d been put there for.

“My dad told me to hold him steady. ‘Don’t reel him in yet. Don’t give him slack. You stay with him or you go with him.’ I followed him up and down the bay till he wore himself out. Tommy helped me haul him into the bottom of the boat—a big wet slippery mess splashing around like he was possessed. I was sure we were gonna capsize. I was soaked from head to toe, my mouth full of water mixed with the blood pouring outta his gills.

I looked at my dad and asked him for help. ‘What do I do with him?’ He threw an oar into my hands and said he wouldn’t help me. ‘You kill your first catch.’ I threw it right back at him and told him I didn’t want no part of that. He took it and smashed the tarpon a dozen times with all his might, blood flying-up everywhere, till he broke its backbone with a heavy blow. Then he grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and threw me down to the bottom of the boat. ‘I’m gonna beat you,’ he said. And he did.”
“What for?” I ask, baffled.

“He was a big man, in size and principle. Never did like mulling things over. Always said you weren’t a real man till you got the pride knocked outta you. Whether you make trouble or get into it, you take your medicine like a man.”

He picks distractedly at the perch’s wrapping. “Back at our old house in Texas Territory, back on our pappaw’s farm, there was an old creek that ran out back. The forest came down to the bank on both sides, kinda like this. I knew every inch of the banks. Where it was shallow, where it was deep, where the turtles buried their eggs, which rocks they sunned over, where the crayfish built their nests, and where the heron came to feed.

“I spent every day out there, barefoot and tan, digging up flint arrowheads left behind by Indians and hunting-down bait for Tommy—crayfish, minnows, grubs, and frogs. He threw most of them back. Too bony, flesh too tough and flavorless, or too vicious. Them pike are mighty bad table fish—bad flesh, full of bones—violent and mean. He kills till he’s satisfied then goes on killing purely for the love of blood, strikes out once in hunger and a dozen more times in anger. He’ll snap your fingers clean off if you ain’t careful.

“Downriver, out past a bend, the neighborhood boys angled freshwater drum. You couldn’t eat them but they’d kill them for their gold stones. Killed dozens a day. Easy to catch, ain’t fussy with bait, ain’t hard fighters. They’ve got two pieces of enamel in their head about the size of an old penny. One’s carved with an L, the other with a J. Them boys would crush their heads with their bare feet and grab out the stones. They were precious. Priceless. Tommy would kill them and pass me his. We always had a couple in our pockets.

“They had hundreds, killing just to kill, a riot of butchery and slaughter. Blood-thirsty boys who measured kills by pools of blood and piles of bones. They didn’t know any better. They had no principles, no humanity, no respect, little common sense, and they didn’t care to control their destructive hands. If killing’s a test of courage, the boss of a slaughterhouse would be the ruler of the world. There’s little sense in mangling life. You can’t kill something deader than dead.”

He looks at me directly with heaviness in his eyes. “This here’s a bad age, Ellie. An age of terror. These times ain’t like those times. I know it ain’t easy growing-up out here but growing-up ain’t easy no how.”

I feel his whole body heavy with melancholy. If he were the kind of person who I could hug, I’d give him a big hug. I can’t find the right words to say to him, either, so I do the first thing that comes to my mind. I take the flower crown from my head and put it on his. He lets me do this. He doesn’t say anything but he smiles faintly. He moves it around a bit and sets it at a rakish tilt. He looks ridiculous and I tell him this. We share a little laugh. It’s a nice laugh.

We hike upstream, spark a cooking fire, and fry the perch. He saves me the cheeks, my favorite part, and he sucks the eyeballs clean from its head. When we’re done eating, he breaks-off a green ash sapling, shreds the tip with his knife, and scrubs his teeth with it.

We stare at the embers, and doze off, lulled by singing frogs and the trickling stream. Sunset fades to twilight. We rouse as a haunting loon wails downstream. The fire’s burned down to glowing coals. All around us, woodland beasts rustle the undergrowth. It feels eerie. If Joel weren’t here with me to carry my fear I’d be pissing my pants.

He throws a log on the fire, golden sparks flying upwards. “Reckon it’s time we saddled up,” he says.
“I don’t like it here,” I say.

“I’mma tell you what. Next camp, I’mma teach you how to shoot.”

I scoff. “I know how to shoot.”

“I’mma teach you the right way. With my rifle.”

I fold over my lap, laughing. Just like him. He always thinks his way’s the right way. The best way and the only way.

“What’s so funny about that?” he asks. “Good shooting ain’t learned overnight.” He grabs his rifle and holds it to his chest. “My dad put a rifle in my hands as soon as I was old enough to understand his instruction. He learned from his pappaw on his bolt action rifle, protecting his sheep from coyotes and wolves. He kept it above the fireplace, hung over the mantle, always close at hand.”

“You remember your first shot?” I ask.

“Sure do.” He slaps the stock to his shoulder and jerks it in pantomime. “Closed my eyes, fired my rifle, and fell down on my backside. The recoil damn near kicked me over into the next county!” He laughs freely. “Down came a white dove with a long broken wing. He landed right in my lap and laid there stunned, glaring-up at me!” He laughs deep from his throat, his eyes twinkling with humor.

I picture this and I find it very funny. I laugh with him until my eyes blur with tears. This laugh with him feels good. Real good.

He sits at my side, cradles the frying pan in his lap, and strums it like a guitar. He throws back his head and sings to the stars, momentarily unburdened from worry and threat.
“Fear’s cumulative,” Joel says, standing behind me, his hand resting on the small of my back. “It’ll never have the same power to paralyze you after the first time. By and by, you’ll grow less afraid.”

“That’s some bullshit,” I scoff, my arms raised above my head. The flat of my hands are pressed together and my fingertips point to the sky.

“It’s true,” he says. “Even getting shot at.” He holds me by the waist and guides my body into the proper diving position over the limestone quarry edge. “When you jump, picture a straight line running from the tips of your fingers to the tips of your toes. Strike the surface of the water at an angle. Keep your knees together and straight, and your legs closed till your feet are underwater. Aim for a clean entry. Don’t hunch-up your shoulders. And whatever you do, don’t belly-flop. It’ll knock the wind straight outta you.”

“You won’t let me drown, right?” I ask.

He laughs like it’s a joke, like I’m not totally terrified of diving off this ledge, head first, into the murky water below.

“On my mark. Ready?”

“Wait!”

We’ve been camped here at the flooded-out limestone quarry for a couple days now. It’s a nice campsite, pitched over a smooth slate outcropping bled in the passage of weather. Early mornings and late afternoons, we strip to our underwear and swim over the rusty cache of cranes, bulldozers, excavators, and dump trucks sunk thirty feet below. He loves this. Loves being back around all the construction vehicles he said he used to drive for work.

He didn’t have the chance to teach me how to swim at Jackson, so he’s teaching me the next best thing—how to dive. Yesterday, he taught me how to do a plain-front dive take-off. I stood on the ledge while he treaded the water below and coached me to jump, feet-first. Today he’s teaching me solo flight.

He shifts his feet impatiently. “That water ain’t getting any shallower or closer the more you dawdle,” he says. “On my mark.”

“Ready,” I say.

“On three, two, one—mark!”

I draw a deep breath and tip toward the water, his hands guiding my body. Now! Flight, panic, and free-fall. I hit the water with a disarrangement of air and light. I kick to the surface and tread in place, looking up at him on the limestone ledge. “How’d I do?”

“Good,” he says. “But it wasn’t how I showed you.”

“Were my legs straight?”
“Do it again.”

“Were my ankles touching?”

“You’ve gotta keep at it till it’s instinctive. Fundamentals.”

He watches me dive from the outcropping, and passes me pointers on my technique and form. Soon enough he grows bored, takes out his braided leather blacksnake, and snaps it at clusters of flowers, the petals ricocheting into the water. When I get sick of practicing, I sit at his side on the outcropping ledge. He greases his blacksnake with melted pheasant fat from last night’s dinner.

During our morning swim, he showed me his backward dive. In one fluid movement, he raised-up on his toes, sprang upward, threw his hands over his head, and sliced into the water backward, graceful and lithe. I want to learn to dive so I can dive like him. “Think I’ll ever dive like you?” I ask.

“Reckon with enough practice anything’s possible,” he says.

“You were right about fear. I’m not afraid of anything.”

He laughs dryly.

“Maybe getting shot at,” I say. “What’s it like?”

“What’s the use of bothering about it?”

“In case something happens.”

“Nothing’s gonna happen.”

“But what if?”

“You’re wanting the truth?”

I nod my head, yes.

He stares into the middle distance. “You never forget the blow of the bullet. Violence—savage violence—smashing into your body and hot blood seeping under your clothes. The blood’s kind of comforting, though. You’ve never been as cold and weak as when you lay dying. Hovering between life and death—first you get angry, then you feel helpless, then humiliated. Once you get sleepy, you know you’re pretty near dead and you pray you pass-out before you take your last breath, pray the end comes with merciful swiftness.”

I don’t like the sound of this. I don’t like picturing this happening to me or him at all. “That sounds scary as hell.”

“It doesn’t scare none. There’s little terror in death. No heroism, either. You’re almost relieved. At a certain point, the odds are stacked so heavily against you, you don’t care if you live or die. I’ve come so close to my own death so many times, it no longer holds any terror over me. I’ve been to my own funeral more than enough times.”

He picks-up a pebble, rolls it between the flat of his palms, and skips it across the water. “Dying’s easy. Surviving’s hard. Enduring. That’s tough.”
“Rifle, saddle, and rope,” Joel says. He holds his rifle loosely in the crook of his arm and caresses the stock with his free hand. “The cornerstones of a free society.”

We stand beneath the swaying mantles of a stately cottonwood on a grassy plain belted by low mountain foothills. Everywhere you look, the land’s beautiful.

“America’s a great nation born of marksmen,” he says over droning cicadas. “The puritan, the pilgrim, the trapper, the cavalryman, the mountaineer, and the revolutionary. Driven from native lands to seek a new life, settled it and preserved it. Hard-boned frontiersmen abandoned their plows in the fields to defend their country, their kin, their homestead, their property, and their possessions. The rifle restored law and order in the territories. It was his steady companion as he cut a path through the forests with his ax in his hand, stalking his prey and killing his enemies. It started and ended his wars, guarded the borders, protected his kin, and kept the wolves and savages at bay.

“In its simplest form, a rifle’s no more than a tool. Its merit depends on what you’re fixing to do with it and its success depends on its shot. No man ever picked-up a rifle the first time, and shot good and straight. I couldn’t even hit the broadside of a barn, but by and by, I controlled my nerves, turned them to steel, and never got discouraged by my failures.”

He pauses and scans the grounds. He always does this. Looks-up every half-minute to make sure we’re safe. “First lesson,” he says. “Never point a weapon at anyone unless you intend to kill them. Second: never pull your trigger until the target’s seen and known. Third: your rifle should always be spotless from dust and dirt, chambered and close at hand. Fourth: proper trigger pull’s the key to hitting your target. We’re gonna practice till it’s second nature, till it becomes part of you. Once you get it down, you’ll always hit what you aim at, praying the wind doesn’t change direction or speed.”

He lifts the bolt handle, cycles the bolt, ejects the .308s from the chamber, and slips them to his pockets. He opens the magazine cover, lowers the floorplate, and pulls back the bolt handle. “Dry fire.” He hands me his rifle. “You’ve gotta learn without knowing when your rifle’s gonna fire. Without flinching, jerking, or shutting your eyes. Without swinging or dropping the muzzle. Sloppy marksmen are either lucky or they’re no longer here to talk about it.” He points to a rusted stop sign at the field’s perimeter. “Cock and aim at that there target. Aim for the O.”

I swing up the stock and look down the barrel, aiming for the O. He comes behind me and draws me back against him. He encircles my trigger wrist and puts his head against mine. I lean back into him. I suppose it sounds stupid to shoot imaginary bullets at a stop sign. It’s not like I can shoot imaginary bullets to kill an enemy or to bag game, after all. I can’t always have Joel down my kill. I’ll have to kill again, eventually. At least, I will if I want to survive. I’ll have to kill. I suppose it’s better to hit my targets with a clean shot than wounding things. That wouldn’t do.

“Your pull should be slow and steady,” he says. “No jerking the trigger. Slowly increase the pressure. No flinching, no squinting, and no blind firing. Keep your head clear. Breathe-in deep and fill-up your lungs.” He draws an exaggerated breath, exhales one long exhalation, and says, “Slow breath out.” I synchronize my breath to his. “When you start breathing-in,” he says, “start pulling back the trigger. Maintain your sight picture, empty your lungs, and fire. Sights scoped in?”

“Front to rear,” I say.
“Target clear?”

“Crystal.”

“Hold her tight—she kicks hard!”

I tighten my grip.

“Shoot like you’ve got one shot. Drive ‘em home. Ready?”

“Ready.”

“On my command. Fire on three, two, one—fire!”

Clack! Dry fire sounds from the rifle. We cycle through sitting, kneeling, prone, and standing positions until the sun slants and casts the low foothills golden. He takes back his rifle, leans against the tree, and reloads it.

Things have changed since the last time we drifted and it’s not because I’m older. The last time, he rarely looked me in the eye. He was angry and resentful for being saddled with a sheltered QZ girl. I could feel his antagonism toward me and I didn’t blame him. I kept saying to him silently, just one more day, Joel. Please just give me one more day to be stronger, smarter, and braver. I woke-up every morning worried he was going to ditch me but he never did. This time around, he’s treating me more like an equal. I can see it in his eyes. It makes me want to be a better person for him.

“Thanks,” I say.

“For what?” he asks and digs .308s from his pockets.

“For always teaching me stuff. You’re the smartest man I know.”

“I’m the only man you know.”

“You know everything about everything.”

“You can thank my ancestors for that,” he says. “Those on my father’s side were old-stock pioneering folks. Back in the 1800s. They went West to seek their fortune as government scouts.”

“Out here?” I ask.

“Arizona Territory. New Mexico Territory.” He lifts the bolt handle and slides in the cartridges.

“They traveled from fort to grazing camps, surveying land for the government. Making sure the lords and dukes had their papers in order on hunting expeditions. They took them out as guides.

“When the Apaches and Navajos stayed on their reservations and behaved, times were good, but when word came down from the ranchers that they set-out on the warpath, raising hell, their lives were in constant danger. They’d pack-up mules and follow the hostile tribes through deserts and mountains—no grass, no woods, and no water. They ate in the saddle and slept on the ground with their horses’ reins tied to their wrists so they could mount at the first sign of danger. They tracked the tribes to their campgrounds, studied the lay of the land, and figured out their strengths and vulnerabilities. They’d attack at dawn with a fellow regiment, stampede and startle-off the horses, storm the teepees, and drive them back into the hills.

“Their survival was their vigilance. Their lives depended on their watchfulness and interpreting
signs. Those who survived were the lucky few. They lit out for Arizona Territory and joined the Rangers. They had no uniforms or flags, just a five-pointed silver star worn under their vests. They patrolled the borders and busted Mexican outlaws, cattle rustlers, and renegade cowboys who cut-out steers from the big herds along the Rio Grande, and head them off before they could hit the international line.”

What a luxury to know one's lineage. I think of all the cool relatives I may or may not have had and it feels bittersweet. I realize everyone’s their own person and it’s not who your family is that’s really important but what you are. But what if my ancestors were great kings and queens? Great warriors or learned scholars? “I wish I knew who my ancestors were,” I say.

“I’m sure you’re worthy of them,” he says.

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

We head back to the quarry on a narrow road winding through thistle fields. We come to a pasture with a bunch of frolicking fox pups. They box, run, and bark like puppies. I can’t take my eyes off them. Their joy and innocence makes me feel light as a feather. They notice us and stop playing, tracking us with curious eyes. I take an apple from my pack, bite-off little pieces, and toss them into the field. As we continue down the road, I look back and see them examining the pieces of apple and playfully fighting over them.

This might be one of the cutest things I’ve ever seen in my life. I want one so bad, I almost feel myself whining. A sweet little fox cub. I’d make him a little harness out of rawhide and take him for walks. When his little foxy legs got too tired to walk, I’d tuck him under my arm. I’d bathe him and play tag with him. I’d cook him pancakes and stuff him till he couldn’t move. I’d always have someone to talk to and I’d curl up with him at night in front of the fire. I already know the answer will be N-O, but I feel compelled to ask Joel if we can have one, so I jog to his side. “Joel? We need one.”

“One what?” he asks.

“One of those little cubs.”

“You’re gonna be mighty disappointed if you think I’m gonna say yes, Ellie.”

“Please?” I beg.

“No pets. Pets can’t concern us. Pets are extravagant. One day, he’ll get to acting reckless and you’ll have to finish the deal yourself. You know how things go out here.”

He actually said this. He actually said I’d have to kill my own pet. I suppose he’s right. It would only be sensible. I think of all the people who had to kill or sell their pets and it makes me very sad.

“It’s not right to take wild animals outta their natural environments and make pets outta them,” he says. “Something always happens, sooner or later.”

“But they're the cutest things I’ve ever seen!”

“I ain’t running a pet store. And even if I was, I wouldn’t be selling pet foxes.”

“Please?” I beg.

“Unless I can skin it and cook it in a pot, or fry it in a pan, pets have no use here! Let it go begging in the woods.”
What a stupid world to live in. Never allowed to have a soft sweet cuddly warm pet to love with your whole heart and feel its unconditional love back at you. Just as I start pitying myself, we pass a backstop ruffling paper scraps. This catches my eye. You find these papers everywhere—sun-bleached and bled-out in bad weather. Missing person’s flyers scrawled with loving pleas, ultimatums, and prayers, some even written in blood from knife-pricked fingertips. The first time I read them, I felt guilty, like I was reading a private letter intended for someone else, but now I read them compulsively. I memorize the details and make-up little stories about them.

I pull one from the backstop and look at it. Old and written in very shaky handwriting. Someone who was old and sick.

Looking for Paul Kenneth Sturgis from Valentine, Nebraska Territory. Missing since spring, 20 and 32. Paul, come home. Your home is here. You’re needed here. It’s been a year since we last saw you and we reckoned you weren’t far behind. I’m getting old, Paul. Whatever you’re doing and wherever you are, drop it and make it here by winter. We need you here. Reckon there’s plenty of reasons but I’ll wait to tell you in person. Don’t let anything keep you. With love from your dad.

I wonder what’d happen if one day while I was looking, I found a note left for me. Left by someone who was looking for me. Could you imagine being so important to someone and so loved by someone, they’d leave you a note? What if Joel and I got separated? Would he leave one for me?

“Come along now!” he yells, noticing I’ve fallen behind. “Stop dawdling!”

I jog to his side. “Think there’re any families still together?” I ask.

“Even if there’s sons left to swear their fathers’ vengeance, there’s no graves to swear it on. Not a single patch of earth hasn’t felt the misery of displacement. Not a single corner of this earth’s had that privilege.”

“What if we get separated?”

“Not gonna happen,” he says. “Nothing’s gonna separate us. Not now, not ever.”

“But what if?”

He grabs my arm and stumbles to a halt. Without letting go of my arm, he looks at me directly. He needs to tell me something. I see it weighing heavily in his eyes. “Don’t you be leaving me no notes,” he says. “No matter what, I’ll find you. Don’t you worry about it. I’ll always find you.”
“I hate these places,” Joel says and scratches his beard with the back of his hand.

“They can’t hurt us,” I say.

“I don’t fear nor pity the dead but something ain’t right with this place.”

We stand in front of a twenty-foot flagstone wall topped in menacing ironwork circling the Woodland Memorial Cemetery. Bruised clouds bank-up for a sundown storm.

I jostle my pack over my numb achy shoulders. We’re parched, starving, and exhausted. We’ve strayed wildly off-course. He’s convinced Route 20, a major artery running through Nebraska Territory, cuts along the back of the cemetery walls. That’s where we need to go. He wants to hole-up overnight in one of the overloaded abandoned vehicles you often find littering the highways.

“Let’s just go around,” I say.

“Storm’s gonna rage when the sun sets, ten minutes tops,” he says. “Quickest way’s straight through.”

“Maybe it’ll pass?”

“We ain’t sticking around to find out.”

We enter the cemetery through the archway of a two-story gatehouse, its wrought-iron fences swung wide open. It reminds me of the small old churches we had in Boston with narrow windows and slate-tiled roofs. The gatehouse opens onto a large circular courtyard with a limestone fountain in the center, its large tub crusted in verdigris and flooded in runoff. A couple wide gravel paths fan from the fountain into the cemetery, winding past tombstones overhung by old cypresses, magnolias, and hemlocks. All the paths slope upward to three plateaus with grand plots and monuments.

We choose the center path. Joel raises his rifle to combat-ready and sweeps the landscape. It’s dead quiet in here. Dead quiet, huh, Joel? I’m dying to make this joke but Joel’s not in a good mood.

“Someone’s been taking real good care of this place,” he says. He’s right. Everything’s upright and unblemished. No graffiti, no garbage, and no overgrown foliage. You wouldn’t even know the Critical happened if you’d been hanging-out here.

“What was it like when funerals were invented?” I ask.

“Invented?” he asks.

“When you buried your dead in coffins, in separate graves, in cemeteries—and the dead stayed dead.”

“Expensive. Dying was big business. Doctors, lawyers, auditors, undertakers, coroners, florists, clergy, houses of worship, caterers—they all had to be paid.”
We reach the top plateau, culminating in marble and glass mausoleums decorated in white crosses and black obelisks. The sun slips behind the black clouds. Ominous thunder rumbles. Joel scans the rear flagstone wall topped in very sharp and very dense ironwork. I don’t like the look of this ironwork. One small slip of your foot and you’d be impaled. It’s already happened to him once and once is enough for a whole lifetime.

“Boost me up?” I ask, meaning the opposite.

“Too high for a boost,” he says.

“Suppose there’s another way around?”

“Your supposing’s way off. Follow me and do as I do. The quicker, the better.” He grabs my arm and leads me toward the downhill path fringed in hemlocks. Cool wind whips the blackening skies. Thunder ripples. This is the kind of storm you’d love to watch roll-in if you were safe and dry in a secure place but we’re outside in it and it won’t be much fun.

About halfway to the gatehouse, he halts abruptly in his tracks. I wasn’t expecting it so I slam into his pack. Just as I’m about to ask him what the hell, I hear menacing clicks and caterwauls coming from the path ahead. Infectids!

“Run!” he yells and shoves me from the path. Two infectids shriek and rage toward us. I sprint through the inky twilight and draw my pistol. Catastrophic footfalls and raucous screeches echo behind. I grab a large votive candle from a tomb ledge, hurl it into an infectid’s chest, and plug two 9mm’s into its shoulder. Decayed flesh splatters the flanking tombs.

Pack! Pack! Joel’s gunshots split apart the air and stab the darkness, exposing his cover behind a downfield mausoleum. I slalom the tombstones and slip to his side. He pulls me closer and holds me tight. A couple gravestones away, three shadowy infectids stagger between them. We need to get past them to get out of here. Joel grabs a tin flower vase from the tomb and discards the silk roses underfoot.

“Get ready to run,” he whispers. “If we get separated, get to the gatehouse and get to the street.” He hurls the vase uphill. It clangs against a distant headstone, accompanied by the shrieks and footfalls of the infectids chasing after it.

“Run!”

Wind whistling my ears, I sprint downhill tailing Joel, my arms raised over my face to shield myself from low branches.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Shotshell explodes behind our shoulders, fired by an unknown muzzleloader, from near the spot where we’d just departed. Enemy shots. Fired by a stranger. I don’t even want to think about who this stranger could be. I suppose we’re the target because Joel says we’re always the target. He curses and bolts forward, heading toward the gatehouse. I draw-in my shoulders expecting to feel the enemy’s shotshells slam into my back. It never comes.

I sprint into the courtyard and my ankle buckles. I stumble, and skid onto my hands and knees. Joel sees this. He comes to a sliding halt in front of me, hauls me to my feet, and shoves me toward the gatehouse. We dash through the archway and slam into the iron gate to find it locked, barricaded in our absence. My blood ices with the realization someone’s locked us in. He curses and wrests an enormous padlock binding the thick metal chains. It’s useless.

“Move or we die!” he yells. He grabs me by the collar and races us back into the courtyard. We
stumble to a halt and fall back a couple steps. My scalp lifts in fright. I feel Joel’s body stiffening in fear. In front of us, a big bulk of blackness rises-up from the shadows. He shoves me behind his shoulders and levels his revolver toward the unknown menace.

A lantern’s chimney uncloaks, bobs, and lifts high in front of the shadowed figure. The clear yellow flame cuts an arc through the darkness, casting the lantern-bearer—a petite round woman in a floor-length robe and a habit. I almost laugh at how absurd this is. With her little round face, she looks like she couldn’t hurt a fly. Someone stands behind her. A tall skinny man with a simmering double-barreled shotgun. He grins at us. He looks like someone who’d hurt a fly with great pleasure.

“Francis, be not afraid,” Sister Camille says to the tall skinny man.

He doesn’t respond. He won’t respond. He can’t respond. He’s a mute. I told Sister Camille I didn’t know what a mute was and she said they communicated with hand gestures and facial expressions complementary to her Carmelite vow of silence. This didn’t explain anything to me about a mute. I haven’t had a free moment to talk to Joel so I can’t ask him myself. I suppose mute means Francis can’t speak because he’s been sitting across from me at a wooden table in the gatehouse kitchen for twenty minutes and he hasn’t said a word or made a sound. I find him fascinating. I have so many questions I want to ask him. Maybe he saw something happen in secret and vowed to cut-out his tongue so he’d never be tempted to tattle. Or maybe someone did it to him to keep their secret safe. Who knows? This is the kind of thing that’s going to bother me till I find out.

Sister Camille’s a nun. This is obvious. She wears a dark shapeless robe that skims her leather sandals. What a luxury to be a nun. You devote your whole life to no one but yourself and you praise God. You live your whole life safely shuttered behind a convent’s walls. You suffer for God but you never leave your home so you don’t actually see anyone suffering. What kind of life’s this? Who’d want this kind of life? I suppose someone like her.

She stirs a burnished copper stock-pot over a large fireplace filled with an iron kitchen range. The cooking fire perfumes the room. Wild embers spark and flicker the flagstone walls. Beyond the narrow windows strobed white in lightning, thunder rumbles and rain drums the roof. Joel was right about this storm. A heavy unrelenting storm. It would’ve been pure misery out there. I’m very happy to be here, warm and safe and dry in this large cheery kitchen.

“Behold,” she says to the room.

Francis sidesteps a plump orange cat and skitters to her side. She hands him a tray of wooden bowls, and ladles clear brown soup to the brims. He brings the bowls to the table.

He’s got a neat dark short beard trimmed very close but that’s the only thing that makes him look like a normal person. He wears a colorless coarse sweater. It reminds me of the sweaters the old fisherman wore in Boston but we’re nowhere near the sea out here so where’d he find a sweater like that? His dark pants stop well above his ankles and he wears fancy leather shoes. I’ve never seen a man wear these kinds of shoes. You only see these kinds of shoes in those old magazines. You could never wear shoes like these. You’d be heard a mile away. You’d have to wear socks over them to silence your footsteps or just take them off entirely. You could never be stealthy in
these shoes. I suppose he can wear them because he can risk being loud. As loud as he wants. He
can afford not to have to worry about these things here, so I suppose this place must be very safe.
I’m sure Joel realized all of this the moment he laid eyes on him. Joel’s always a couple steps
ahead of everyone.

Sister Camille sets a stoneware plate of baked potatoes onto the table, her hips jangling silver
rosaries tied to a belt. These rosaries make noise, too, but she can afford to wear them just like
Francis can wear his loud shoes. This makes me certain this is a very safe place. Another thing.
The cat. No one keeps bitey animals and no one can afford to have plump house pets, either. Joel
was right. Something’s peculiar about this place. The cat flops onto its side at Joel’s feet. The cat
likes him but he doesn’t like the cat. He nudges it gently away with his boot and sneezes into a
crooked elbow.

“God bless you,” Sister Camille says to him. She sits at the table, bows her head, and mumbles
grace. The cat jumps onto a corner table laid with a large wooden cross, a candelabra, a brass bell,
and wood rosary beads laid over a Bible. “The good Lord delivered you just in time,” she says to
us. “Gates close from sunset to sunrise. It is His will.”

Joel studies Sister Camille and Francis. He’s not watching them to be polite, like the way you make
eye contact with someone to let them know you’re listening and interested in what they have to say.
I suppose he’s too focused on observing them to make arguments with them about God. Here’s
something to know. Joel and I have a steadfast rule when we’re offered food or drink by people
who we don’t know. We always wait until the hostess and kin take the first couple bites or sips
before we consume anything. We don’t do this to be polite. We don’t do this out of good etiquette.
We don’t want to be poisoned. When Joel told me this rule, I thought he was being paranoid, but
when I think of all the ways to die, being poisoned isn’t one of them.

After Sister Camille and Francis take a couple sips of soup, Joel clandestinely draws his spoon
below his nose and sniffs it. He takes a small sip and rolls it around his mouth. After a long
moment, he looks at me and faintly nods his head, yes. ‘Yes, Ellie, you can eat this food;’ I hear
him say to me silently. ‘Eat it all. You need the fuel. Every single calorie counts. You never know
when you’ll eat a hot meal again.’

“Sorry to disturb your premises, ma’am,” he says to Sister Camille. “We didn’t expect to run into
infectids.”

“Hold thy peace,” she says. She flags her little pink hand and clutches a wooden cross strung
around her neck. “News from the outside world is strictly forbidden. It defeats the purpose of this
cloister, a tranquil center of prayer.”

“We were looking for a shortcut to Route 20,” he says. “It runs out back, past them walls?”

“What’s beyond these walls is of little consequence.”

“You don’t know what’s out there?” I ask. I find this unbelievable. How could you live somewhere and not know what’s out your own windows? This doesn’t make any sense.

“The outside world detracts from my allegiance to God,” she says. “Every day I pass in silence and solitude, in reflection and contemplation of the Lord. Whoever did believe, whoever does believe, and whoever will believe shall be blessed.”

More God stuff. I’m getting very nervous Joel’ll say or do something to offend this woman and her strong belief in God. I look at him and I’m surprised at what I see. Humor in his eyes. Humor about to spill over into laughter. Why’s he amused? What’s so funny?

“Ma’am,” he says, “I beg your pardon but you’re missing the whole notion of Moses and Pharaoh out past them walls, Ten Plagues and all.” He glances at me. He finds this very funny. ‘Don’t worry, Ellie,’ his eyes say to me. ‘How ‘bout we have a little bit of fun, yeah?’ He continues, “Swarms of flies, floods, fireballs, darkness, boils, leprosy—”

“To unbelievers and heretics,” she says, interrupting him, “He is hidden. All is light, all is glory, all is victory—”

“There was a great cry,” he says, interrupting her with what I suppose is a Bible quote, “for there wasn’t a single house where there wasn’t one dead.”

“Nothing happens without the Lord’s consent,” she says. “It is His will. We must accept it.” Her tone says she’s finished arguing about God and God’s will, thank you very much.

Joel swivels away from the table and sneezes into his shoulder.

“I’ll send for Doctor Drexler tomorrow morning,” she says to him. “He’ll bring you something for your cold.”

“Don’t fuss over me, ma’am,” he says. “It’s just the cat.”

“He’s allergic,” I say, like I’ve known this fact my whole life, not like it’s something I just found out about him right now.

“Where are you travelling?” she asks me.

I take a moment to think about this. Not just because I need to cue-up a lie. I can cue-up white lies naturally, like blinking or breathing. I realize right now Joel never gave me a reason why we’re travelling east. He never even gave me a destination. I never questioned him or asked him why. Why would I need to know? I suppose I don’t need to know. I trust him blindly. Does he intend to go back to Boston? I never even considered this. And why should I care about any of this now? He didn’t volunteer the information so I can’t get upset with him for not telling me. I never asked for these details. I feel like I should care about this but I don’t. I know we’re drifting east so I go with something in Iowa Territory.

“Des Moines,” I say.

“Why there?”
“There’s a school.”

“What school?”

“A private school I’ve been invited to attend.”

“Nothing’s closer?” she asks Joel.

“No, ma’am,” Joel says.

“You’re travelling awful light for such a long journey,” she says and glances at our packs on the hearth.

“Flooded out,” Joel says.

“We lost everything,” I say, building on Joel's cue and taking it to the next level. “The river took everyone away. The river and the lake water met, and flooded the house. Papa told me to get up on the kitchen table.” I look at Papa right here for emphasis and throw him a faint smile. Papa smiles faintly and approvingly back at me, though I can feel his muscles stiffening-up. He has no idea where my story’s going and neither do I. The one thing I know is Joel’s my papa in this story. I don’t know why I chose to call him papa instead of dad or daddy or pop or pa. It just came out like that and I like how it sounds, so I’m going with it.

“Papa got a ladder and chopped a hole in the ceiling. He pulled me through. It was cold and dark. A man in a boat came by and took us to his barn upriver. We stayed there in the huge hayloft where the chaff was cut and they stored the pumpkins. We roasted them at night—it was the only food we had. Pumpkin for a week straight. There were other families who lost their homes, too. A woman with five children. She was nine months pregnant. She gave birth, but there was something wrong with the baby. It only lived a couple days—”

I’m interrupted by Joel’s boot striking my shin beneath the table. I gasp and camouflage it with a fake coughing fit. Joel’s had enough.

“Ma’am, I beg your pardon,” he asks over my coughing fit. “How many other folks are here?”

“Many blessed souls,” she says. “Since 1881. Lieutenant Sutton can tell you everything you want to know. Call him Bill. Everyone calls him Bill. He knows every inch of these blessed grounds. He was a squadron leader, shot down by kamikazes. Willie looks just like him. The same smile and the same jaw. He’s got Ginny’s blond curls and eyes. He looks like a little angel.”

She glances toward the courtyard. “We’re the first cemetery but not the first burial ground. The trees are much older. The trees held the storks and their nests. A nest in every tree and a stork in every nest. That was before those loud angry soldiers came. God will punish the wicked men for their sins. It is His will. Death has passed upon all men because all men have sinned.

“Francis loved the storks. He scattered feed and watched them raise their kin—until those wicked evil men burned down their nests. At dawn, the storks circled where their nests had been and brooded on the walls. They flew away and never came back. God will punish the wicked men for their sins. He will punish the world for its evil.”

She cradles her bowl and smiles wistfully at Francis. “He came to me when he was four—small, withdrawn, and fragile—with the eyes of a frightened animal. Neglected and dressed in tattered rags like a poor beggar, unwanted and unloved. I gave him shelter. He was very hard to handle. A bad eater and a poor sleeper, sullen and withdrawn. He’d built a wall around himself. Through prayer, penance, and austerity, I taught him God’s love, His heavenly glory and brightness. Soon,
he started to eat well and sleep properly. He started to play and laugh but he hadn’t ever spoken a word like our Lord upon the altar, silent during Mass.

“He loved the storks. He gave them all the love he was unable to show people. One day, one of the storks had babies. His eyes lit up and a huge smile blessed his face. He wouldn’t leave their side. One morning, I couldn’t find him. He was curled-up in a nest, holding one of their babies. He said, pure as God’s love, ‘You’re a darling stork!’ It was the first and last time I heard him speak. I cried unashamedly. Words work miracles. His humanity, His divinity, His glory, His beatitude. It is the Lord!”
Sister Camille rises to her feet. “You must pardon me,” she says. “Evening prayers.”

“And we should turn in,” Joel says. “We’d appreciate a place to sleep. We’ll be gone by first light.”

“You may sleep with Francis,” she says, “and the child will sleep with me.”

Joel and I glance at each other, our lips parting soundlessly in protest. Now what? We insist on each other’s company in unknown places. The inextricable link between us binds even tighter under threat or danger, immediate or remote. We can’t be separated. We won’t be separated. He’ll make us leave the premises if she insists but I hope she doesn’t because I don’t want to go. It’s the first warm safe shelter we’ve found since Jackson. I don’t even need the comforts of a bed. I’d be perfectly happy sleeping on the floor in front of the hearth. We could even sleep at this table. We’ll turn it upside down, pad it with bedding, tuck ourselves in, and sleep like logs.

Joel clears his throat nervously. “Ma’am, we ain’t particular. It makes no difference.” He gestures toward the floor. “Fact is, we’d be fine right here on the—”

“Womenfolk and menfolk do not lay down in the house of the Lord!” she yells, interrupting him.

I kick Joel’s shin sharply beneath the table and glance at him. Joel, I’ve got this, this look says, and I pray he follows along. I address Sister Camille. “Ma’am? I can explain. I’m unwell.”

“Dear child,” she says, “the good Lord will watch over you and keep you safe.”

“Thing is, I lied to you. About Iowa Territory. About the private school.” I lay a hand over my chest. “I’m sick. It’s my heart. The doctors say it could stop at any moment. They didn’t even think I’d make it past my first week. They say it’s a miracle of God.”

She looks at Joel accusingly. “A child with a weak heart shouldn’t be allowed out there.”

“It’s our only hope, ma’am,” he says, building on my lie. “There’s a specialist we hope to see. They say he’s the best in the whole country.”

“I didn’t mean to lie to you, ma’am,” I say. “I just don’t like talking about my problems.”

Mouth straightening into a thin line, she clutches the wooden cross over her chest. “I didn’t intend to put a child of the Lord in harm’s way.” She walks to the corner table, picks-up a rosary, and presses it against her lips. “Uphold me with thy spirit.” She lets the rosary slip through her fingers. “Francis will show you and your father to your room. Peace be with you in places of death, in places of suffering, and in places of glory.”

A strong wave of relief washes over me. She unclips a large skeleton key from her keyring, hands it to Francis, and addresses us. “You will leave your guns here.”

What’s this? What’s this all about? You want us to leave our what, where? I glance at Joel. I can tell he’s trying very hard not to look at me because this would make us seem suspicious. To protest
such an innocent request. I think about this. I try to put myself in her position. I guess it’s only fair. We’re complete strangers, after all. I could understand the courtesy of such an act. It would show that we put an implicit trust in her as a host, and show faith in her ability to protect everyone within her walls. I think it’s a fair request but Joel won’t leave his guns behind. Never. It’d be like asking him to leave his watch. These are things he won’t part with voluntarily.

I glance at the windows. Rain drives against them and lightning strobes them white. Now, don’t get upset, I tell myself. At least you have warm food in your belly when you’re thrown out into the cold dark wet night. Just as I feel my shoulders drooping in disappointment, Joel unholsters his pistol and revolver, and lays them on the table along with his rifle. I control my face to look very calm and unconcerned, like it’s a normal thing to see him relinquishing his guns.

Francis takes them from the table and sets them on the large mantle, leaving everything in plain sight. He lights a cotton shred floating in a small oil-filled tin cup and heads up a narrow stone staircase along the rear wall, licked in raucous candlelight.

We follow him up the stairs, smooth and polished in age, to a small landing. He unlocks a heavy wooden door and ushers us into a large rectangular room. It’s built in the same style as the kitchen, laid in flagstone with a low ceiling of blackened wooden beams. The long wall has two small square shuttered windows with a small wooden desk between them. Along the far wall there are two single wood-frame beds with large wooden crosses nailed to the headboards.

Crosses aside, I like the look of those beds. The sheets are crisp, white, and clean. I want to sleep naked in those beds. I want to feel the warmth, cleanliness, and crispness of the sheets against my bare skin. Joel can’t argue if I want to sleep in my underwear. We’re very safe here. I get very excited thinking about this, sleeping in these beds.

Francis hovers the doorway and watches us with wide dark eyes. I wonder what it’s like to be a mute. To not be able to comment on things that bother me or not be able to let someone know when I’m happy or sad. To never sing or shout or whistle. To never make a peep. It’s an amazing thing to think about. What if he’s got a gorgeous voice, like a sweet graceful tenor or a burnished resonant baritone? “Lemme ask you something, Francis,” I say.

Joel calls my name in that tone of voice that says, Shut up and mind your own business, Ellie.

I ignore him and continue speaking to Francis. “Do you not talk because she’s the only person to talk to around here?” I ask, meaning Sister Camille. I smile faintly after I say this to let him know I’m making a bit of a joke. How does someone like him live with someone like her? Could you imagine living with a nun?

His eyes go wide. For a moment I think I’ve offended him but he opens his mouth wide and laughs silently, slapping his belly. He’s pleased. I’ve made him laugh. This makes me happy. If he can laugh, he must have a tongue, so I ask him. He smiles wide and sticks out his tongue, firm and pink. I stick-out mine in response. He laughs again. I’m happy to have made him laugh. I want to ask him so many more questions about being a mute, so I start asking, “Do you ever just wanna—”

“That’s enough, Ellie,” Joel says, cutting me off. He addresses Francis. “I reckon she talks enough for the two of us, yeah?” Francis laughs at this and claps his hands in approval. I laugh, too. This is a good joke. Joel knifes a hand toward him for a handshake. “Appreciate you taking care of them infectids back there.”

Francis shakes Joel’s hand. He keeps shaking it long after a normal handshake should last. He does this until Joel pulls his hand roughly away. Francis clearly likes shaking hands with people because he knifes his hand toward mine for a handshake. I slip my hand into his and we shake. He starts
drawing my hand toward his mouth. I suppose he wants to kiss the back of my hand, which is fine
with me. You know who’s not fine with it? Joel. Joel doesn’t like it one bit. He shoves Francis
back against the wall. I know this shove. He uses it with me. It’s not meant to hurt him. It’s meant
as a firm warning. Step back and pull yourself together, this shove says. He’s overreacting but I
suppose he feels extra-vulnerable and defensive without his guns.

“You’d best keep your hands to yourself, son,” he says sternly and pulls himself up full length.
Francis rips through the doorway and darts down the stairwell, his brogues slapping the slate. Joel
slams the door shut behind him and throws the iron bolt defiantly over the latch.

“He’s harmless!” I yell at Joel.

“Pipe down,” he says. “I told you something ain’t right with this place.” He says this like it’s
supposed to excuse his temper, like he hadn’t overreacted. He paces around the room and inspects
everything. Every corner and behind every piece of furniture. He opens an armoire full of linens
and bedding. He pulls-out two boiled-wool blankets, shakes them vigorously, and tosses them onto
the beds. “Take off your clothes, air out your boots, and sleep while you can.” He crouches over
the floor and traces his flashlight beneath the beds.

I’m happy to hear this. There’ll be no argument about me sleeping in my underwear. I go over to
the small wood desk with the bidet and the wash-up bowl. I splash water across my face and neck,
gasping.

“Wash all them parts,” Joel says.

“I don’t smell,” I say and draw my nose to my armpit.

“Wash ‘em,” he says, his voice disciplinary.

“Wash yours!” I yell. "You reek!"

“Hush your fool mouth and be quick. There’s not much oil.”

I strip down to my underwear, splash my armpits, and rub everything between my legs with a wet
hand. I slip into my bed. He sits on the bed across from me and strips down to his silkies. At this
point in his bed-down ritual, if he had his guns, he’d tuck his pistol and revolver beneath his
pillow, and tip his rifle against the headboard or set it in the corner if it was within arm’s reach. He
must feel the absence of his weapons acutely. It must be one of the couple times in twenty years
he’s been without them. It doesn’t bother me at all. I feel very safe here, like we’ve stepped out of
the real world. This place feels completely disconnected from what’s outside.

He walks to the desk and splashes himself down with water from the bowl. He blows out the
lantern flame and climbs into bed. Steady rain patters the slate-tile roof. For the next twelve hours
or so, I’m briefly liberated from chores, with all my responsibilities cast aside till dawn. This
pleases me greatly. I feel this sense of freedom bubbling over and I can’t hold myself still. It’s the
first time we’ve been in real beds with clean linens, blankets, and pillows since Jackson. I’m happy
to be relieved of my clothes, happy to feel these warm clean sheets on my bare skin. This makes me
remember how good we had it at Jackson. I realize how quickly we got used to the comforts of
regular meals, soft beds, and living behind a well-stocked settlement with a strong blockade. There
was order, peace, and protection. Sunday Mass, pristine gardens, hot meals, tidy cabins, and
orderly guard duty. The memory of its conveniences feels extravagant after a month of drifting. Out
here, we’re always on the move. We’re rarely at rest.

“Hey?” I ask Joel. “Was this place a port?”
“All them ports were leveled to rubble before you were born,” he says.

In the Post World’s first decade, survivors who fled quarantine zones—unable to defend their homesteads from hostiles and military—holed-up in communal shelters, sanctuaries, and safe houses. They were often founded in places like meeting halls, theaters, churches, and warehouses. Places the military hadn’t yet seized or destroyed. Swarming with sick refugees, the vast majority were single mothers, senior citizens, and orphans. Starvation, illness, filth, squalor, crime, and corruption were endemic but it was safer than drifting alone.

Around the time I was born, the military started destroying them to dissuade infection. This actually happened. They’d lock everyone in and burn them to the ground. The people inside weren’t worth the ammo or the effort of quick execution by a blade. Before they outright started doing this, I heard they’d send-in freshly-infected decoys like Trojan horses. I guess they didn’t want to look like outright murderers.

“Why are there crosses on the beds?” I ask.

“To protect us from indigestion,” he says.

I know he’s making a joke but I don’t understand it. This place must feel like Heaven to Sister Camille. Living in a state of perfect protection, sheltered from everything outside these walls. Nothing touches her here. No war, famine, outlaws, or viruses. The world outside her gates has gone to Hell but she has no idea. She’s living in the same world as us but she’s not part of it. Like Heaven. I wonder if Heaven for a dog’s different than Heaven for a person. It must be. All the beef to eat, bones to gnaw, sunny spots to lounge-in, and squirrels to chase. To lay on the warm hearth all day at their master’s feet. Maybe Heaven for a dog’s something like that.

“Do you believe in Heaven and Hell?” I ask.

“Sleeping would suit you a lot better than yapping,” he says.

“I don’t.”

“It doesn’t matter. You’re going to Hell for lying to a nun.”

“You lied to her, too!”

“You already led her down the wrong trail.”

“Would you rather be bedding down with Francis?”

“I’d rather say a thousand Hail Marys on a bed of nails and red-hot coals till sunrise.”

I feel bad laughing at Francis’s expense but I picture this in my head and it makes me laugh. I slowly sober and ask him, “You still don't believe in God?”

“If He exists,” he says, “He sure as hell regrets putting mankind on earth. He tried blotting us out before. It didn’t work.”

“What do you mean?”

“Noah.”

“Noah?”

“Noah and the Ark,” he says.
I suppose he’s talking about a movie, a book, or a celebrity from the Old World because I have no idea who Noah and the Ark is.

“They didn’t teach you that in Scripture?” he asks.

“Proverbs and psalms.”

“Back in the biblical days, God reckoned he was done with mankind, too lawless and corrupt for His own tastes, reckoned He’d blot-out folks for good. He took a liking to this fellow, Noah, told him to build an ark, said He was gonna bring about a flood and destroy mankind, birds and beasts alike. He told him to load-up his family and two of every kind, male and female, from elephant to ant.

“Stars fell from the sky, the moon turned red with blood, and rain came down for forty days and forty nights, flooded the earth till the tallest trees on the highest mountains scraped against the keel. When the rain stopped, the sky lit up with rainbows and he sent out a dove. It came right back.”

“It came back for the other dove?” I ask.

He scoffs. “There was nowhere to land. Everything was still covered in water. He waited another week, sent it back out, and it came back with an olive branch. He sent it out a week later and it never returned.”

“What about the other dove?” I ask.

“What other dove?”

“You said Noah took two of every animal, male and female. How’d the dove just leave the other dove behind?”

“I’m not trying to make a moral or spiritual statement here.”

“But it’s the Bible.”

“It’s just a story.”

“I don’t get it.”

“That’s not my problem,” he says. The bedsheets rustle and I hear him turn away from me. He clears his throat and speaks. “When we were out there running from them infectids, did you see anyone?”

“Not a soul,” I say. “No doctors, no storks, no soldiers, no Kamikazes.”

“No one’s still around from that war.”

“I’d go crazy, too, if I never left this place.”

“Some people give up everything, even their sanity, to die in their own home as long as it’s still standing. There’s not a wind strong enough to cut her loose from her familiar lands. They’ll have to kill her or carry her out.”

Imagine knowing the place where you were born, living in that same place your whole life, and dying there. Incredible, really. “That’s so lucky,” I say.
“Luck’s got nothing to do with it. It’s blind instinct. Animals, wounded and sick, crawl back to the land of their ancestors to die.”

“She’s lucky to have a home to die at.”

“And we’re lucky to have her shelter. Sleep while you can. We’ll be gone at first light.”

I wake from fitful dreams, alone in the bed where Joel had bedded-down last night. The flagstone walls are washed monochromatic grey in the hour before sunlight. I vaguely recall leaving my own bed overnight and climbing into his, and pressing my back against his. Warm, sweaty, and heavy with sleep. Maybe I had another one of my wet dreams? Impossible. This is the unsexiest place in the world. Severe austere wooden beds with giant crosses over them. No way.

I sit upright and look around the room. Joel sits in the far corner. He’s dragged the desk chair back there. He’s got it tilted back and his head rests heavily against the wall. He’s fully dressed. His eyes show the mark of little rest. His forehead’s lined in sleepless vigil. He looks at me and says, “Saddle up.” He unhooks his boot heel from the chair rung and the front legs drop to the floor. I dress at the windows and look out. You can’t see much from here. An otherworldly mist wreaths the cemetery plateaus.

The kitchen’s dark and empty. Joel’s guns are on the mantle exactly where he left them last night. He gears-up with a sense of forced calm but I know getting those guns back into his hands must feel like an alcoholic with a stiff drink.

The front gates are still locked. I remember Sister Camille saying the cemetery was closed from sundown to sun-up so I suppose we’ll have to wait till sunrise. To burn time, we wander the grounds aimlessly and silently. Joel’s sleepy and surly from being up all night, though he won’t tell me why he couldn’t sleep.

My heart skips a beat as he trips over a brass grave marker. He stumbles forward and catches himself upright, cursing softly. His flashlight falls to the ground and clangs against an enormous granite tomb. In the unearthly silence, it sounds like someone’s struck a gong.

“Are you alright?” I ask.

“Don’t make a fuss,” he says and tightens his pack across his shoulders. “Didn’t sleep so good.”

“Neither did I. Figured we’d sleep like the dead.” There. I had to say it!

“Get that from your joke book?” he asks. I know he appreciates the joke because he acknowledged it. Usually he just pretends like he didn't hear me.

He grabs his flashlight from the ground and shines it over the tomb he tripped over. He makes a funny noise that sounds like he wants to say something but doesn’t know how to say it, followed by, “I don’t suppose you remember the name of that pilot she was going on about?”

“Bill?” I ask. Of course I remember. I love these kinds of stories, just like the missing person’s notices. Puzzles that need to be solved. “Bill Sutton,” I say. “And his wife, Ginny, and their son, Willie, with blond curls like an angel.”
I follow his flashlight beam to the tomb carved with an eagle-winged anchor medallion above three silver-framed photos. I gasp. It’s them. Bill and Ginny and Willie. Last night, Sister Camille was talking about them like they were real people, not like they were ghosts who died decades ago, buried in this grave. It’s totally them: a strong-jawed young man in a military cap, a young woman with upswept ringlets, and a curly-haired child. The tomb lists a bunch of details, including their names and the dates they died, long before Joel was even born.

My whole body breaks-out in goosebumps. Without a word, we jog swiftly to the gatehouse. We find the gates thrown open in our absence and tear onto the street washed watery pink in the rising sun. I can’t remember the last time I’ve been so happy to see the sunrise.
Joel slides a jar of peanut butter and a spoon over the granite-topped kitchen island. I scrape out a spoonful and eat it. Gritty thick rancid paste. Too sweet and too salty. “You ate shit back in your day,” I say.

“Would you rather be licking dew off a rusty hubcap?” he asks. “Gutting a frog and eating it raw ’cause we’ve got no cooking fire? Brewing-up grass tea?” He grabs the jar out of my hand, takes a spoonful, and tucks it defiantly to his mouth.

“I think it’s gone bad,” I say and wrinkle my nose.

“It’s just a little rancid.”

“What if it’s poisoned?”

He smiles. “Then we’re both gonna die.” He leans against the countertop and scrapes-out another spoonful. As he eats, I walk around the kitchen and run my hands over everything. Cherry-wood cabinets, terracotta pavers, gold-leaf tiled backsplashes, and stainless-steel smoked-glass appliances. Bone china tableware, silver platters, and crystal vases are stored safely behind glass-paned cabinets. Everything’s orderly and tranquil. A palace fit for royalty and I feel like a queen. I suppose the people who lived here were very rich because of their big refrigerator. Joel said refrigerators were common appliances—everyone had them—but I still don’t believe him.

“How many families lived in this house?” I ask.

“One,” he says.

One! He said one! And he used the same tone of voice as if I’d asked him how many suns were in the sky. ’Just one sun, Ellie. You can see it plainly yourself. Go on and get yourself an eyeful if you don’t believe me.’ I heard his answer clear as day and I still don’t believe him. Nobody with any common sense would. In Boston, a three-bedroom house this size would’ve held at least three big families, one in each bedroom. And probably a couple more families in the living room with a bedsheets divider strung between them.

“One?” I ask, my voice incredulous.

These kinda homes were built to show-off the wealth of their owners,” he says, “not their needs. They brought the QZ mind to the country. They plowed-out fields of flowers, flattened the hills, tore up the trees, and put in artificial gardens and swimming pools. Frame-laid, and knocked together in the pioneer spirit of great haste and progress.

“This is the pool house. The owners lived in the main house out yonder.” He gestures toward the main estate, which sits across the sloping lawn past a large gazebo. The grounds are tucked behind massive stone walls overgrown in ivy and sumac. From the road, you couldn’t even see it. Just its front iron gates with a wide paved driveway curving around an overgrown island of myrtles and hawthorns.

He might call it a pool house but it feels like an enchanted castle to me. Real furniture, stairs, and
carpet. Carpet! You walk on the floor and your feet don’t even make a sound! Can you imagine such a thing? I couldn’t, so I walked back and forth over the wall-to-wall carpet in the living room, overcome by the plush padded sensation beneath my bare feet. Joel wasn’t as excited as I was about this. In fact, after I laid down on the carpet and started rolling around, he yelled at me to get up off the floor. ‘It’s not the floor, Joel,’ I corrected him. ‘It’s the carpet.’

I go around the room and flick every switch repeatedly, on-and-off, trying to imagine flicking a switch and having a light turn on. Turning-on the faucets and having hot and cold water come straight out of them. Turning a dial on the stove and having a flame shoot out of it! Flicking the switches on the electric things that brought the whole world into your house—television, phones, radios, computers. It’s unbelievable, really.

You can’t blame me for being so impressed. We haven’t changed our clothes in a couple months and rarely removed our shoes. We’re crusty in filth and sweat, and unshaven and unshorn. We slept on the cold hard earth with a single blanket between us. We endured stifling humidity, scorching heat, bone-chilling dampness, maddening hunger and thirst, and swarming bugs and parasites. We forgot things such as tables, chairs, and beds even existed.

After the Woodland Memorial Cemetery, things started to go bad. Real bad. South Dakota Territory was one big wasteland of black charred soot. Grassfires had ravaged everything. Fire’s your servant when it’s under control and your enemy when it gets away from you. Joel told me that.

In the Badlands, we camped on a rocky plateau and watched wild horses gallop past a line of ragged buttes way off in the distance. It looked like a string of black dots below a yellow-brown cloud of dust. Joel told me the story of the Battle at Wounded Knee that night and there wasn’t one bit of good in it. It felt like an omen and I suppose it was. The further we pushed into Iowa Territory, the worse things got. Desolate suburbs full of rubble and dust. Roads gluey with decay and crunchy with bone fragments. Cities of the dead, Joel called them. Abandoned pork processing plants, state penitentiaries, aeronautical HQs, and credit card companies.

We ran into signs of ferals everywhere. You could tell by the crude graffiti. Every surface was covered in eye-rolling threats like ‘ALL WILL DIE’ and bloody handprints everywhere. We tried to cross the Missouri River but every crossing was heavily guarded by the military, fifth columns, or rebels. We hated Iowa Territory so much, we didn’t even want to risk dying and leaving behind our dead bodies for all eternity, so we headed north.

After we crossed into North Dakota Territory, I started to reach my limit. My patience was wearing thin. Where were we going and when were we going to get there? I never asked Joel where we were going or why, and he never told me. It didn’t matter. I realized something major about Joel. He drifts just to drift. Joel drifts to forget. He drifts to put distance between himself and his painful memories. To distract himself from his heavy thoughts, and to think of nothing else but using his muscles and his mind to survive. Drifting’s the only way he can find peace and quiet in this world. I know this because it happened with me and Tommy. The pain of his absence feels less acute. I’m too busy keeping my head down and watching where I put my feet to dwell on my own heartache. I suppose the ones who keep their feet firmly on the ground and stay rooted to one spot are the ones who get hurt the most. When you’re out here in this big country, everything feels so big, and your own problems feel so small in comparison.

This morning, I woke-up angry and impatient. I hadn’t felt those bad emotions since Jackson. I was resolved to have it out with Joel. I felt my resentment growing toward him every single day. I felt like I was being held hostage. I couldn’t hold it in much longer. I was ready to ask him where the hell we were going and when the hell we were going to get there. I pictured this in my head. I
I wanted nothing to do with the main estate. Too large and intimidating, with balustrade balconies and a dozen brick chimneys. I imagined all those cold dark rooms echoing-back my voice and my hollow footsteps, and it gave me the chills. Even if we wanted to break-into the house, we couldn’t. We didn’t even try. It was impossible. Every window and every door was outfitted with impenetrable tempered-steel shutters, completely rusted shut to their corroded frames. The pool house had these shutters, too, on every window and door. Joel was ready to move on but my gut told me differently. I talked him into boosting me onto the large cedar pergola over the patio so I could scale the roof. He relented, I suppose to shut me up. Under a small eave, I found a tiny quarter-arch vent unshielded by the imposing shutters. It was a very tight fit. I just made it.

“Time to clean,” Joel says.

“Nothing’s dirty,” I say.

“Suppose you’ve got something better to do?”

I follow him to the back of the kitchen, past the walk-in pantry to the laundry room.

“Know the first thing a momma bird teaches her little ones?” he asks without waiting for me to answer. “How to keep its nest clean. Before teaching them how to fly, how to perch, how to forage, how to hide, how to refold their wings, tuck their heads, bathe, drop, dart, or float.” He hands me a rag and a bottle of cleaning fluid. “Go on, pluck out them dirty quills and scales. Keep your hands busy, pass the time.”

I wander through the house and put minimal effort into cleaning it because it’s the cleanest house I’ve ever been in. Joel’s idea of clean is much different than mine. Ten minutes into cleaning, I notice my hands have started to swell-up. My skin’s hardened from drifting but it’s not used to the harsh Old World chemicals.

I find Joel in the kitchen. He stands at the center island with a cordless phone cradled to his ear. He looks dazed, lost in memories. He notices me and sort of snaps out of it. He sets down the phone. “That was awful quick,” he says.

“Cleaning’s dumb,” I say. I slide into a ladder-back barstool at the center island.

“You don’t gotta like it, you’ve just gotta get on with it.”

“I’m allergic,” I say and flag my red swollen hands.

“Saturdays, me and Sarah cleaned the whole house, did the laundry, and washed my pick-up. I gave her an allowance for it.”

“What’s an allowance?”

“Money for doing chores. A weekly salary. I set the amount when she turned five and increased it every year. She could use it however she wanted but if she broke something around the house by being careless, she had to pay for it, had to figure out how to save to pay back the debt.”

“That sounds complicated,” I say.

“It taught her the value of money—how to work hard to earn what she wanted, how to save, how to
budget, and how to spend it. If she wanted to buy something special, I gave her a loan and deducted it from her weekly allowance. She learned how not to spend on credit."

“How’d she spend it?” I ask.

He touches his watch. He touches it on instinct whenever he thinks about her, which is often. I hate to see him heavy with sadness so I change the subject. “Do you miss that thing?” I ask, gesturing at the phone.

“I wasn’t big on it,” he says.

“Why not?”

“The way folks used it was a pain.”

“How’s that?”

“The concept was good enough. Talking whenever you wanted to whoever you wanted, and keeping folks close, folks who lived across the country or on the other side of the world. But they were always interrupting things. When you picked it up, there was always someone shouting in your ear, telling you things you’d be a whole lot happier not knowing, asking for bad news, or wanting to spread it. Bored nosy folks were always turning private affairs into public property, spreading rumors too good to die, and asking other folks to be their brothers’ keepers. In one breath they’d be telling you who was living in sin with who and whose kid was in jail. Marriages and divorces, weddings and funerals, pregnancies and medical misfortunes—spreading a whole lotta miscommunication and gossip. And there was a whole mess of rules that didn’t apply face-to-face, like hanging-up. Talking on them never felt natural—lines were always dropping.”

“Dropping where?” I ask.

“Connections. Getting off was a whole song and dance. You could say your house was on fire or you were expecting an important visit from the Queen of England, and the answer was always the same. ‘I promise I won’t keep you long.’”

“How’d you know who it was?” I ask.

“You asked them.”

“Wasn’t it weird talking to someone without seeing them? Blind talking?”

He smiles. “In the Revolutionary War, there was a general who told his troops to hold their fire till they could see the whites of their enemy’s eyes. I reckon he would’ve hated this damn thing as much as I did.”

We head to the second floor to explore. It’s smaller than the ground floor but just as luxurious. A master bedroom, a master bathroom, and two large walk-in closets. Four more families could live up here, easily.

The master bathroom’s laid in white marble. There’s a walk-in whirlpool in a recessed nook as big as an M3 Bradley, one of those military battle tanks from Boston. I climb into it and lay on my back. The clean smooth porcelain feels so nice and cool against my skin. Imagine a big beautiful tub where you could bathe every single day to keep yourself free of lice. You could practically swim laps in this tub. Like your own private lake. People in the Old World didn’t know how good they had it. Above the tub is a large glass chandelier. I stare at it, entranced by the candlelight reflected in its crystal medallions. Imagine a chandelier over a bathtub. Even if I were to tell
someone in Boston I saw this with my own eyes, they wouldn’t believe me. What’s a chandelier doing over a bathtub, they’d be like. Are you supposed to eat dinner in it? That’s wicked fucking queer, they’d say.

The master bedroom’s even bigger than the bathroom. It has the most beautiful bed I’ve ever seen, made of simple clean mahogany wood with four posters interlocking into a canopy. The rest of the furniture matches the bed. Wide dressers, an armoire, and a floor-standing mirror between two leather armchairs.

An atrium with French doors leads to walk-in closets—his and hers. The man’s has a casual collection of polo shirts, gaily-printed shorts, jeans, and knitwear in clean light colors. The woman’s has silk blouses, shift dresses, lacy lingerie, and cashmere cardigans. A center island console holds accessories—silk scarves, gold-plated jewelry, and perfume in etched-glass bottles. It feels completely unreal, like I’m in one of those old luxury department stores from the old magazines. Something out of Gold’s tales of Beverly Hills. I wish he was here to see it. There are wall-to-ceiling mirrors that open in a way to make them three dimensional so you can see yourself three different ways at once! No wonder people in the Old World were so vain and obsessed with their weight. You always had to look at it!

Before dusk closes-in, we make a dozen trips to a narrow brook intersecting the driveway spanned by a small footbridge. We carry buckets of water to the whirlpool tub in the downstairs bathroom where we’ll do our bathing. We spark a fire and boil-up a couple buckets over the marble-topped burner grill island on the patio. Two hot and one cold. We pour-in the hot with the cold as we bathe and keep the second hot one aside the tub to keep warming-up the water as we wish.

I let Joel bathe first because I know this pleases him. While he bathes, I explore the downstairs bedrooms. In the smaller one, I find the clothes of a twelve-year-old boy. The tags say so and his clothes fit me just right. I grab a pair of sweat pants and a ribbed tank top.

Joel finishes bathing and I shut myself into the bathroom, eager to bathe. It’s a beautiful large room laid in creamy porous limestone the color of warm sand, the same material as the large patio and the in-ground swimming pool. I’d pave the entire world in this limestone if I could.

I strip naked and sit on the built-in bench in the walk-in shower. It’s made of small gold tiles like you’d imagine in a harem bath somewhere exotic on the other side of the world. I could live the rest of my life in this bathroom and be happy, I could. I sample a little bit of every beauty product, massaging fragrant foam from head to toe and washing my hair multiple times. I shave my whole body until my skin’s smooth and bare.

Swaddled in enormous plush white towels, I hoist onto the sink countertop and sit between the sinks, savoring the privacy and cleanliness of the quiet room. I trace my smooth silky legs and the soft bareness between my thighs, smooth as an eggshell. It’s the first time I’ve been able to shave myself since Jackson. I love being hairless between my legs. The way it makes me feel completely naked. The way I can see my twat spreading open and shining pink between my thighs when I spread my legs. The way when I slip in a finger, I can see it disappear into my little hole, stretching and closing over the knuckle. There’s nothing but naked slippery skin and heat between my legs, and with no bush to soak up my wetness, I’m always wet.

I spread myself wide open with one hand and slip in a finger with the other, watching the skin stretch and close around it. Stretch and close. Stretch and close. I play with myself as I cue-up a fantasy.
“That’s good coffee,” Joel says, his voice carrying from the kitchen. He says it to himself because he’s the only one in there. I’m in the living room getting dressed, my body still heavy and slow with sleep. Even if I hadn’t heard him, he says this same thing every single morning as the first brew-up meets his lips. He loves coffee so much, I suppose he’d say it even if it were a bad cup.

I cross into the kitchen and mutter, ‘Morning.’ He mutters it back to me. I drop my pack on the floor cast in soft dashes of sunlight coming through the perforated shutters. The smell of freshly-brewed coffee fills the room. He stands at the center island exactly where I pictured him because it’s where he always stands every morning while he drinks his coffee. Joel’s spot. Joel’s spot’s always the place in the room where he can see all the doors and windows, and everyone coming and going.

He’s kitted-up in plate armor and a cross-body bail-out bag slung low around his hips. We’re going on scout. Last night when he told me this, I was very excited but right now I’d be happy to crawl back into my warm bed, which was one of those deeply-tufted leather couches in the living room. I’d sleep on that leather couch for the rest of my life, I would.

“I heard you get up,” I say.

“I tried to be quiet,” he says.

“Are we still going on scout?”

“I always keep my word. You know that.”

I slide into the stool at his side and lay my head over my arm, cushioned over the cool granite countertop. I’m still so tired I could fall back asleep on this cold hard countertop. He beckons his coffee cup toward me, offering me a sip. I make a non-committal grunt. I tried some a couple days ago. Strong, thick, and black. I had tremors in my hands and couldn’t stop talking for hours. He got so sick of my talking, he put his hand over my mouth at one point to shut me up. I don’t know how he can drink so much of it. I’d be halfway to the moon if I drank as much coffee as him.

“Go get yourself some grub,” he says and gestures toward the walk-in pantry. “Put it where it’ll do the most good.”

“I’ll eat when we get back,” I say, my voice thick with sleep. It’s too early to even think about food.

He walks to the pantry and I hear him rummaging around the shelves. He comes back over to me and I feel him stuff something into my jacket pocket. I reach-in to see what it is and I pull-out a chocolate candy bar. He wants me to eat garbage for breakfast! No eggs, no bacon, no trout, no tea. So be it. I go to lay my head back down on the counter but before I can, he takes my face in his hand and looks at me hard. What’s this? What’s he doing? I can see all the questions gathering-up behind his eyes. Hard lines settle around his mouth. He doesn’t like what he sees, whatever it is.

“Is that…make-up?” he asks.
“No!” I yell, meaning the opposite. Yes, it’s make-up. So what. What’s the big deal? I pull to my feet and take a big step away from him.

He takes a big step toward me and sniffs broadly. “And perfume?”

“No!” I yell, meaning the opposite. Yes, it’s perfume. Jesus Christ. I can’t get anything past him.

“Go wash-up.”

“What for?”

“Get going.” He points in the direction of the bathroom.

“I’m not wearing any!” All lies.

“The bathroom’s that-a-way, Ellie,” he says, his voice commanding. “Hustle.”

I think about what to do here. Stand my ground or obey him. It doesn’t matter because he doesn’t give me a chance to decide. He marches me from the kitchen to the bathroom, steering me by the elbow. I don’t want to jeopardize scout so I go along with him. He shoves me through the bathroom door and plants in the doorway, his body filling the frame. “After you’re done washing it off, rustle-up all that junk, put it in a garbage bag, and leave it right here.” He gestures sharply at his feet.

“What for?” I ask.

“You’ve got too much to do than get mixed-up in that kinda nonsense. I’m taking it outta this house and burying it in the yard.” He slams the door shut and yells at me through it. “And find something else to wear! Something that don’t stink!”

I wait until his footsteps retreat down the hall. I strip-off my t-shirt and bury my nose in it, smelling the perfume. Spicy and exotic. What’s the harm in it? What’s the harm in smelling like cloves and amber? Do you know how many ration cards you had to hoard in Boston for a small vial of perfume? A year’s worth! You had to skip one meal-a-day for a whole year till you had enough to trade-in for a tiny vial of rancid perfume and there were no guarantees you’d find a black marketer who even had it. It was that precious. Joel knows this. He knows how precious it is.

I’m sure he’s already figured it out. Figured out how the perfume ended-up on my clothes and the traces of make-up on my face. For the record, here’s exactly what happened. Last night after supper, he brewed-up a big press pot of coffee like he always does and sat down at the kitchen island to field strip our arsenal. I knew I’d have a nice big chunk of time alone with myself so I slipped-off to explore. Why wouldn’t I? I love wandering around this house full of soft carpets, cool marble, and sleek wood. I rolled around the carpets, jumped all over the beds, and rode the armrests of the couches, pretending they were horses. Do you know what it’s like to have a whole house to yourself? Mirrors to look at yourself as long as you want. Books to read, artwork to get lost in, and knickknacks to study. It’s heaven.

I ended-up in the master bathroom. Treasures everywhere, like the vanity console with its full drawers of cosmetics, hair care potions, and nail polishes. I played with everything and gave myself a faceful of make-up, creamed-in a dozen eyeshadows and traced my lash lines with graphic black pencil, followed by a dozen coats of mascara.

I looked into the mirror and laughed freely. At first glance, I looked like a little kid who’d gotten into their mother’s make-up. But after turning my head this way and that way in the mirror, I was struck at how my features popped and my skin shimmered. I loved the silky satiny feel of it on my
skin, the soft perfumed smell, and the sparkle of it in the candlelight. For the first time in my life, I understood why people wore make-up. It’s a lot more fun than digging around in the dirt and it smells a whole lot better. It was a funny thing to find myself enjoying something I thought wasn’t for me. I embrace the change eagerly.

You know who wouldn’t embrace the change eagerly? Joel. That’s who. I wish I could’ve gone downstairs with my face done-up and waited for his reaction. ‘What’s a girl like you wearing make-up for?’ he’d say with a playful laugh. ‘Look at you all painted-up like a circus clown!’ Or maybe he’d be like, ‘Having fun, Miss Ellie? You sure look quite the lady, painted-up like a doll. I reckon you’re getting old enough to be fit for such ladylike things.’ But Joel’s not that type. He’d say something like, ‘Wipe that goddamn crap off your face! That’s the face you were born with. If I’ve gotta put up with it, you’ve gotta put up with it, too!’ Fact is, he’d be happy for me to stay the same 14-year-old tomboy he met in Boston. I wonder if it’s why we’re always drifting. So he doesn’t have to stop and sit still, and watch me grow-up. No time to contemplate me turning into a young woman. I know it makes him uncomfortable. But why should it? What am I doing that’s so wrong? Why should I feel like I’m doing something wrong? I don’t understand this at all.

With all that weighing on my mind, I crept downstairs to the first floor bathroom, tossed my hair into a baggy topknot, and scrubbed my face clean. Why should I feel ashamed of wearing make-up, I thought to myself as I washed my face. Why should Joel care what I do with my face? I was so full of big confusing thoughts, I forgot to check my reflection to make sure I’d removed all the make-up. Well, I hadn’t. The traces are still here. I can see it plainly as I study my reflection in the mirror. It looks even better today than it did last night. The way my eyes smolder with traces of inky kohl, softly shimmered. I look worn-in, rebellious, sensual, urban, sexy, and tough as hell. I look like a cooler smarter edgier version of myself.

You know what? Fuck Joel. That old tyrant. I decide this right now. I’m not washing the rest of it off. So there. He needs to realize I’m growing-up. I’m not a kid anymore. I’m a young woman. Trying new things is a healthy part of growing-up. Challenging authority and making my own judgments. I need the freedom to work these things out by trial and error. He needs to give me the freedom to explore these things, free from judgement. If I want to wear make-up, that’s my own damn business, not his.

This is so dumb, I think to myself. I can’t believe I have to justify my feelings over this. It’s way too small of a thing to get angry about but Joel’s simmering over it. Why? Maybe it hurts his feelings I don’t confide in him about these kinds of things or ask his advice. Well, I can’t. He’s too closed-minded and strict. If he weren’t so backward and didn’t have such old-fashioned standards, we’d never fight.

One thing about him is, he’s prejudiced in his beliefs. That old Southern pride and prejudice. He believes his way’s the right way and his mind’s closed to anything else. He’s indifferent to the opinions of others. He expects me to live by his rules made for his way of life. He doesn’t let me be myself. I’ve got my whole life ahead of me. He’s already lived his. Let me live mine the way I want to.

I suppose my independence frightens him. All the people he loved are gone. Sarah, Tommy, Tess. I’m the only one left. When I no longer need him, who’s left? No one, that’s who. One day I won’t need him anymore. Then what? You know what? It’s not my problem. It’s bound to happen. He needs to start preparing for that day and until it comes, I’m not changing for him. That’s for sure. It’s time we had it out.

I go back to the kitchen, defiant, ready for confrontation and intent on telling him all these things. Just as I open my mouth to speak, I realize the kitchen’s empty. No Joel. He’s not here. Cold sweat
breaks-out over my upper lip. Has he gone on scout without me? How could he leave without me? He’s doing it to punish me, I suppose. To teach me a lesson for defying him. I curse his name under my breath. I look around the room and spot his pack on the floor. So he hasn’t left. He’d never go outside the wire without his pack.

I call-out his name. Silence comes back to me. I wind through the house until I find him in the living room. He stands like he’s expecting me, backed against the fireplace with his legs asprawl, his arms crossed over his chest kit, and one hand massaging his chin. I find myself so relieved he hasn’t left without me, I’m willing to forget the whole thing. We can talk about it some other time. Tomorrow, next week. Never. Whatever. “Ready?” I ask.

“Change of plans,” he says.

“What? Why?”

“You ain’t fooling me none.”

Fine. It’s time to have it out. Here we go. “Listen, Joel, we’ve gotta talk.”

“Don’t start a fight with me, Ellie. You ain’t gonna win.”

“I’m not trying to start a fight. You’re being unreasonable. I do everything you ask and I ask nothing in return. You’ve gotta stop treating me like a child. Women wear make-up. It’s no big deal.”

He scoffs. “You don’t know the first thing about being a woman.”

My face flushes with anger. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means exactly what I said.”

“Look, I’ve spent the last couple years living the life you want and it’s taught me one thing. Your narrow point of view. You only think how you were brought-up to think. The world’s changed!”

“You’re mighty clever at working your mouth, yeah? But that’s about all, I reckon.”

“See what I mean? You’re always cutting me down! No one exists in this world but you. You spend so much time thinking about yourself, you seem to forget there’s someone else here. Me, for instance.”

“We ain’t equal,” he says. “Not in maturity nor experience.”

“That’s why you need to give me the room to become my own person!”

“You think it’s better out there?” he asks and gestures in the direction of the front door. “Go right ahead.”

“I can’t imagine anything worse,” I say, my voice bitter.

His eyes narrow in disgust. His chin sweeps into an aggressive line. “You don’t like me, yeah? Not as your guardian nor as a man. One of these days, I’mma teach you a thing or two. You got that?”

“It’s none of your business if I wanna wear make-up or not!”

“It becomes my business when you break the rules!”
“You never think about my feelings! You don’t care about what I want!”

“I don’t gotta. I hold to what I know’s right!”

“Right for you! You always make me feel like I’m doing something wrong! I have my own ideas and you think all of them are wrong.”

“You’re hell bent on getting into trouble, ain’t you? Well, I’mma give you the trouble you’re hankering for.”

“Do whatever the hell you want!” I yell. “You don’t listen to me anyway!”

His lips curl with contempt. “I’mma do what I’ve wanted to do since the first time you back talked me, yeah? And I’mma do it again if you don’t learn your lesson.” He unfastens the quick release strap of his bail-out bag, dropping it to the floor with an ominous thud. “I’mma tan your hide, child. You’ve got anything to say for yourself?”

“You wouldn’t!” I yell, the color draining from my face. “You can’t! I’m a young woman!”

“Almost. And I’mma punish you before you turn into one.”

“Look,” I say, my voice penitent. “If it’s such a big deal, I’ll go wash it off.”

He pulls himself up full length and takes a menacing step toward me. “Now let’s get to an understanding here, yeah? When you go looking for trouble, you oughta be ready when you find yourself in it. You get my meaning?”

“Joel, you’re overreacting.”

“You’ve been out here way too long to know what happens when you back talk me. I’m expecting you to take your punishment like a big girl.”

“Stop calling me that!” I yell. “I’m a young woman!”

“Looks like we’re of the same mind about one thing, Ellie. You’re growing-up fast. I reckon if I wanna give you a thrashing, I’d better get it right ‘cause tomorrow you might be too big.” He rips aside his assault plate carrier, lifts it from his shoulders, and drops it onto the couch. He sits on a large leather ottoman at the foot of the couch. “Let’s get to it. Take off your jeans and your underwear.”

My mouth goes dry. “You can’t do it. I won’t let you do it.”

“Ellie, I’mma count to three, and if those jeans and undies ain’t down at your ankles by the time I’m through, I’mma do it myself.”

My face blushes violently from my neck to my scalp.

“One...two...three.”

Neither of us moves nor speaks.

He beckons me forward.

I don’t move, rooted to the spot.

He strides purposely across the room and grabs me by the arm, dragging me toward the couch.
I struggle against him. “What are you doing?”

“I’m doing whatever the hell I want!”

“You can’t make me!”

He lets go of me and sits down on the ottoman. “You may as well make-up your mind to be level-headed about this, Ellie, ‘cause I ain’t changing my mind.”

Fine, I tell myself. Just get this over with so you can go on scout. He promised me scout. There’d better be scout at the end of this.

I wedge-off my boots and slither-off my jeans. Before I can take off my panties, he grabs me by the arm and pulls me closer. He slips his hand against my belly and leads me down over his thighs. I hold myself up from the floor by my arms, and balance my weight over the balls of my feet. The heat from his thighs warms my belly. I feel his fingers slip inside the waistband of my underwear and I resist. “Let me do it myself!” I yell and contort over his lap, pushing away his hand.

He takes me by the shoulder and forces me back down. “No more back talk.”

I lay trembling across his lap. He slips his fingers beneath the waistband of my underwear and rolls them past the curve of each cheek. His hands brush against my thighs and he leaves my panties dangling between my ankles. My face flushes deep and warm. I clench my ass cheeks and thighs together until they’re touching. He lifts my t-shirt from the small of my back and tucks it up into my bra straps.

“Spread your legs,” he says.

I spread them a bit apart.

“Wider. Wide apart.”

Before I can spread them, he pulls them roughly apart himself. I wait for his next instruction but he’s gone very quiet. I suppose he wasn’t expecting to see me shaved completely bare between my legs and he’s taking it all in. My tight pink asshole. My shiny pink wet twat. I feel his cock twitch beneath my belly and I know I’m right. He taps his toe across two spots on the floor near my head. “Hands here and here,” he says. “Don’t move them till I give you permission.”

I put my hands where he indicated.

“Up on your toes,” he says. “Legs straighter, bottom higher.”

I do as I’m told, eager to get it over with so we can go on scout.

“Don’t let those thighs touch, yeah?” he says. He runs his hand over my bottom. “Relax.” He cups each cheek in his hand, bouncing them in his palm and firmly patting them, the flesh jiggling beneath his fingers. He wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me closer. I feel his cock digging around my belly. “I really don’t wanna do this, you know, but it’s for your own good.”

Splat! His hot open hand comes down square in the middle of my ass cheeks, right against the fleshiest crest. I gasp and jolt forward, my bottom clenching tight. He smacks me in the same spot a couple-dozen more times at the same intensity and speed. The skin-on-skin stimulation fans a slow deep burn across my whole backside. I squirm across his lap, my ass jiggling beneath his bouncing hand. He increases the weight of his hand but keeps the same tempo. A warm deep blush spreads across my whole body. I make little grunts and squeals, and wriggle my bottom beneath his hand.
He starts smacking me harder, his hand landing square across the plumpest part of my ass cheeks. I suck-in my breath, hissing. His strokes come stronger and swifter, concentrated across the same spot, but he takes a longer pause between them. After each one, I lift my hips from his lap and clench my ass cheeks as the fresh sting takes hold. Splat! His hand comes down its hardest yet, his fingers biting into my flesh. I yelp, my ass shuddering on contact. I squirm across his lap. Blazing heat sears my bottom, the skin tight, shiny, and sweaty.

“Hold still!” he yells. Splat! His hand crashes harder, increased in urgency and drive.

I wail and buck my hips wildly, swinging my bottom from side to side, clenching and unclenching my ass cheeks. “Joel, stop!” I yell. “You’re hurting me!”

“Are you gonna start listening to me?” he asks. Splat!

“Yes!” I rocket across his lap, straining against him, my bottom throbbing bright fresh pain.

“Are you gonna stop breaking the rules?” Splat!

“Yes!” I kick-out my legs as a deep intense burn sears my boiling thighs and ass cheeks.

“Now take the rest of your punishment in silence.” He slaps my bottom in quick intervals, relenting the severity and weight of his hand. I whimper and surge against him. He slows the tempo of his slaps but his hand comes down firmer and heavier. I writhe over his lap between each smack, squealing and grunting. Thick wetness slicks the insides of my thighs. I thrust-up my bottom to meet his hand on the next blow and his fingers skate across my twat, smearing around in my wetness. He smacks me again and his wet fingers slip down the valley between my ass cheeks, brushing against my asshole. I gasp and scissor my legs, his cock throbbing against my belly. Just as everything starts to feel really good, he says, “Punishment’s over.” He slides a hand beneath my belly and leads me to my feet. I stand in front of him on trembling legs with my eyes to the floor. I scissor my thighs and feel nothing but the heat, slipperiness, and nakedness of my twat, and the heat radiating off my backside. I can’t hold my body still, squirming with that maddening ache between my legs, silently begging him to fuck it away.

“I’ll be watching you from now on, Ellie,” he says. “And if things ain’t as they oughtn’t to be, I’llma come for you and I’llma tear you down. Is that clear?”

Eyes to the floor, I nod my head, yes.

He takes me by the arm and lays me on my belly over the ottoman. The leather cushion’s warmed from his residual body heat. I lay down my head and massage one of my ass cheeks, the skin tight and hot beneath my hand. “You really gave it to me,” I say.

“I’ll do it again if you need it,” he says.

“I need it, Joel,” I say, breathless, silently begging him to fuck me. Can he hear the desperation in my voice? I feel like I’m going to explode. I’ll die if I’m not fucked by him.

“I need it more than you,” he says, his voice thick in his throat.

I hear his khakis’ zipper rasp down, his belt jangle, and fabric rustling as he shucks his clothes to the floor. One by one, I hear his heavy boots thud down. I clutch the ottoman legs, one in each hand, and draw-in my shoulders, anticipating his touch. He squares behind me and I feel the heat coming off his body. I gasp as I feel his lips on the back of my thighs. He licks and sucks away all the wetness till my legs are clean and my whole body’s on fire.
He moves to my ass and kisses each cheek, licking and nipping. He circles around my twat but he moves away every time I think he’s about to lick it. I’m dying to feel his mouth between my thighs. He teases me till my frustration builds to desperation and I can’t hold myself still. I start wiggling and begging.

“Joel, please!” I urge myself against his face, begging him to lick my twat. “Lick my cunt, Joel. Please lick my cunt! If you don’t lick it I’ll die!” He slides his tongue over the lips. I stop begging, and start oohing and aahing. Oh, that wonderful warmth and wetness. I open my thighs wider. He runs his tongue down each lip and sucks them into his mouth, slowly spitting them out, one after another. I urge against his face and beg him not to stop.

He doesn’t listen because right after I say this, he stops. I gasp and groan, my whole body wriggling in frustration. He tells me he’s going to show me something. “I’mma show you something, Ellie,” he says.

My breath comes quicker, imagining what it is. I beg him to show me. “Show me, Joel! Show me!”

“My tongue can go a lot deeper, Ellie,” he says, “and I can suck a whole lot harder.” After he says this, I go completely silent and still.

He spreads me wide open with one hand and digs his tongue deep into my split, licking-up mouthfuls of wetness. I hear nothing but the sloppy dirty sounds of his cunt-licking. Everything he does makes me hotter and wetter. I want to close my thighs around his head and never let go. He digs-in his tongue, his nose rubbing into my split. He stuffs his mouth deeper, twisting his tongue in and out. He sucks and licks the wetness flowing from my twat, dripping down my thighs. He licks my thighs until I’m dying for him to put his tongue back inside me. I beg and I beg. “Put it back in, Joel. Please! Put it back in and don’t stop!”

“I haven’t even started with you,” he says, “and I ain’t holding back.” I feel his hands on my ass cheeks, spreading me wider. I urge my ass against him. I want him to split me wide open till I’m split in half. He runs his tongue over my asshole, soft and squirmy and squishy. I ooh and aah, and hoist my ass sky high as he continues to lick and suck, lick and suck. He runs his tongue over my asshole, playing with it till he pushes the tip up into it. I howl and jump beneath him, almost tossing him to the floor.

He takes me by the shoulder and leads me to my feet. He strips-off my t-shirt and I wriggle out of my bra, my breasts bouncing free and loose against my chest. He leads me onto the big leather couch, laid on my back, and he climbs between my legs. I lift my belly toward him and he arches over me, licking my breasts, and sucking and nipping my nipples. He takes one of my thighs in his hand and pushes it back till it touches my breast. My whole body trembles beneath him. He holds me wide open, and looks at my shiny pink twat and my tight little asshole.

He takes his cock in his hand and pushes the head against my split. He squeezes-in the tip, his balls brushing against my thighs. He tries to fuck the rest of himself in but it’s very tight. I feel him slipping in, slow as a snail. He bucks his hips and slips himself deeper, fucking himself in till nothing’s outside my body but his bush and his balls. I feel his cock splitting me wide open and I start panting. He slips a hand under my ass, holds me open with his other hand on my thigh, and starts to slowly fuck me. The only sound is the sound of our breath, and the wet slap of his cock and balls clubbing my thighs.

I beg him to go deeper. He sets himself deeper and starts hammering his cock into me until I’m ready to split completely open. I throw back my head and take his fucking. His cock gets lost inside me. Everything between my thighs gets very hot and very wet. I howl and come as I feel him coming. He pops himself out and shakes himself onto my belly. “Who just fucked you, Ellie?” he
asks, stroking out cockfuls of hot come over my belly. “Joel Miller, that’s who.” He smears the puddles of come around my belly with the head of his cock.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Knuckles rap against the bathroom door.

“Ellie?” Joel yells through the door. “How much time would you like? I’m fixing on rustling-up some grub.”

The blood drains from my face and quickly returns with a deep flush. “Be right out!” I yell, fighting to regain my breath. Why am I thinking these things about him? Why shouldn’t I? I’d be happy to fantasize about Tommy but I don’t enjoy fantasizing about a dead man. I suppose it’s only natural. I don’t know and I don’t care. It feels too good to stop.

I wait until his footsteps retreat down the hallway and turn my attention back to my twat, pink and swollen to the point of bursting, aching for another orgasm. I slip my finger against my split and it goes right in, slippery in wetness and already finger-fucked wide open.
“Supper suits you?” Joel asks. He eats a forkful of beans and long-grain rice, simmered with beef jerky, bullion, tomato paste, tabasco, and spices. I know what’s in it because we brewed it up together over the patio’s grill island. We’re using cutlery for the first time in ages. It feels unwieldy and slippery in my hands.

“It’s just right,” I say, meaning the opposite. I’ve never tasted these kinds of exotic spices. This is how I imagine they eat on the other side of the world, like something you’d eat in the Saharan desert. Palace slaves serving guests from enormous ornate silver trays of whole lambs stuffed with fragrant rice. Fiery hot relishes and pickled dishes. My mouth’s so overwhelmed, I don’t even understand what I’m supposed to be eating. Who could enjoy such complicated food like this? All I taste are the chemicals. The bleached rice and the synthetic perfumes of the spices. How could he not taste it? My breath smells like I’ve been eating garbage. I already know this is going to repeat on me. “Where did you learn to cook?” I ask.

“I just learned,” he says.

“Did your ex-wife teach you?”

“Your supposing’s way off. In Texas, if your Mama ‘n’ ‘em were in the kitchen, so were you.”

We’re in the living room, sitting at opposite ends of the enormous three-piece leather couch. Our legs are stretched down the deeply-tufted cushions and our feet point at each other. The couch’s so big, there’s lots of room between where his feet end and mine begin. The room’s cast in warm yellow light from a handful of candles spaced along the entertainment center. I’ve never seen so many candles burning at once. I thought it’d feel luxurious but it feels decadent and wasteful. You know what else’s decadent and wasteful? Pajamas! We’re wearing pajamas. This is something that’s happening. Eating dinner in pajamas. The world’s full of wonders. Could you imagine getting dressed again to go back to bed? What a crazy thing to do! All that time and energy wasted. Why not just go to bed like normal people in your shirt and underwear? When you wake-up in the morning, all you have to do is pull on your jeans and boots, and you’re dressed. That’s it. When you change into pajamas, you have to stand around freezing and naked, and put on cold new clothes to wear just to bed, and then you have to change again when you get up. How ridiculous is that?

Joel’s wearing a white t-shirt and a pair of those loose wide pajama bottoms you read about in fairy tales. I’m in the same type of bottoms but with a white ribbed tank top. We’re not only wearing pajamas but we’re wearing white things! Fresh pure clean white. In his white t-shirt, Joel’s hair and beard look blacker than I’ve ever seen them before. White clothes are forbidden. Joel always forbade me to wear them outside the wire. Not because they’d get stained in a minute but because they’re too visible, even in the dark. On moonless nights, drifting, sometimes he’d tie a white rag around his neck so I could follow him in the pitch black. But this was only for emergencies or on super-treacherous ground. That’s what white was for. Emergencies. Now I want to wear white clothes and pajamas for the rest of my life.

So here we are, eating dinner in our pajamas on the couch. I picture a stranger walking into this
house and seeing this scene of me and him in each other’s company. We’d look a lot like a couple, like a husband and wife. It’s an odd thought. It makes me feel like I’m thinking something wrong, but when I picture us as a couple, it feels normal. Like we’re just a normal couple eating dinner on the couch, talking about ourselves and how our days went. This is what normal people did in the Old World, I suppose. They ate dinner and talked about stupid little things, and went to bed with a full belly and their arms around each other. You shut the door to your house at night and found yourself safe at home with your partner, chatting or reading by the fireplace. No drama, no danger, no menace, no trouble. No going to bed hungry, wet, cold, thirsty, scared, or in pain. Everyone was nice and quiet, and not because they were sick and old and dying.

“I was thinking,” I say to him.

“That’ll get you nowhere,” he says. He’s making a joke. I like this joke. He’s in a good mood. Why wouldn’t he be? This is the best and safest place we’ve ever been.

“It feels like there’s nothing outside,” I say, “like we’ve left it all behind somewhere, like we’re just two people and nothing else matters. Like nobody else’s left in the world but us and we’re not part of anything but what’s in here.”

He doesn’t respond and continues eating like I hadn’t said anything at all. I thought it was a clever thing to say but I suppose he doesn’t feel the same way and he’s too polite to disagree. So what.

“Are we gonna stay long?” I ask.

“We might could stop a spell.”

“You lived in a neighborhood like this?” I ask. “In Texas Territory?”

“In the suburbs. In Austin.”

“You never went back?”

“Why would I do that? None of it belongs to me anymore. Places are dead without folks. It’s folks who make places live and breathe.”

“Did your old house look like this?”

“I lived in a ranch.”

A ranch? He never told me he lived in a ranch! “How many horses did you have?” I ask, the excitement overflowing in my voice.

“Not that kinda ranch. A ranch’s a type of house.”

“Oh,” I say, disappointed. “No horses?”

“No horses.”

“Your house looked like this?”

He scoffs dryly. “This is extravagant.”

“Rich people?”

“This kinda living’s traditional notions. Rigid roles. The homemaker married to the breadwinner. The nest-warmer taking care of the nest.”
“Why’d people get married?”

“For a whole mess of reasons.”

“Like what?”

He rests his bowl in his lap. “Some folks just needed other folks, needed commitment, felt like they couldn’t live without love or caring for someone else. Others liked the emotional support, the security, and the companionship. Having an alliance. Some were afraid of being alone or living without love. Others liked the competition, the power struggle, and the challenge of making something work. And some folks simply liked the idea of falling in love.”

“Any of those reasons why you got married?” I ask.

“Them reasons are as old as time. I met someone and we fell in love. That’s all there is to it.”

“So why do some people not get married?” I ask.

He thinks about this for a moment. “I suppose some liked the freedom of being single. Or they didn’t like commitment or didn’t care for affection. Some folks didn’t think they were worthy of love or they were too shy to find someone else, or they were too busy, or their ambitions were elsewhere. Some were so afraid of failure and rejection they just avoided the whole thing all together. You’ll never be as unhappy alone than with someone you don’t wanna be with.”

“Any of those reasons why you and Tess never got married?”

“Tess wasn’t the marrying type. There wasn’t a man alive who could break her. She had a head for business. She was married to the latest deals on the Black. Did I ever tell you the time she smuggled-in a bottle of penicillin?”

“No!” I laugh.

“More valuable than a sack of diamonds.”

“Where’d she get it?”

“She said she’d gone to visit a cousin in Revere. On a day pass.”

“I thought they checked you on day passes. Like, everywhere.”

“They did. They looked everywhere and confiscated everything. She’d dipped them in wax, made a deep cut in her calf, slipped them in, and patched it up. They made her unwrap it just to show it wasn’t a bite. We were still scraping wax off them pills when the sun came up.”

We share a laugh.

“Tess was so cool,” I say.

“She was on the level. One time she smuggled-in a handful of M67s in an old accordion. She played such a racket, they just waved her through to shut her up.”

We laugh freely.

“How’d you two meet?” I ask, not actually expecting an answer.

“I was offered a job. In the Black. I asked around and was told the boss was a woman by the name
of Tess Gardner. She was running things with Tack Turner at the time. Fenway Tack was the title he went by in Boston and other points in Massachusetts Territory. Tess ‘n’ Tack. He was from Framingham, from a long line of bad cops.”

“Were they dating?” I ask.

“I wasn’t reckoning to know,” he says in a forced tone that tells me they were definitely a couple and it definitely bothered him. “If you wanted to find Tess ‘n’ Tack, you could always find them down at the Last Chance, a seedy old bar by Fenway on Comm Ave in the Back Bay, offa Kenmore Square. It was a couple blocks from the Charles, down by the tenements. The sign out front said Kenmore Authority. The military didn’t mind folks ruckusing but they didn’t wanna advertise it.

“No good went-on there. It was a front. The whole basement was dug-out with cells. Wanted men could hole-up and lay low before breaking outta the QZ. There was a whole network of tunnels running clear outta there. Decoy panels in the walls on sliding casters. Some led to cemeteries and ended beneath tombs. Some dumped you out on the other side of the Charles and some went right into it. It was pricey but it afforded protection for a whole lotta mafia, rustlers, and bootleggers.

“I’d heard of her. Everyone had. She had a reputation as one of the smartest toughest black marketers in the quad and I reckon the whole QZ. There wasn’t a man or woman alive who could one-up her and she didn’t take orders from nobody. I didn’t know what she looked like but figured I’d know her when I saw her.

“I got to the bar and it was packed. It was an old gutted warehouse with a mess of tables for cards with every game imaginable. Billiards and pool tables. There were always big quiet men standing around, watching with their guns concealed and ready. There was no hardware allowed but everyone carried anyway.

“I found Tack right away. You couldn’t miss him. He was a gambler and dressed like one. Long black hair slicked back like it was wet, long thick triangle sideburns, a long straight nose, blue eyes, and olive skin. He wore a long leather trench draped over his shoulders. He always kept three big thugs at his side, dressed in black. Big fellows, looking like they could pick-up another fellow like a sack of potatoes and throw him clear into the Charles.

“Then I spotted her. Tall and lean. Long dark hair. All business. She was in her late-twenties long about then and carried herself like a woman twice her age. I reckon I could always size-up a woman right quick—figure-out what makes her tick and what she could or couldn’t take—but I couldn’t size her up and it made me wanna test it, so I did. I walked-up to the bar and ordered a drink. She came over and stood right next to me. I turned to face her and I gave her a good look. She looked right back at me with a hard challenging look in her eyes. I took my drink and turned around so my back was against the bar. She did exactly the same.

“‘Haven’t I seen you before?’ she goes. ‘Reckon not,’ I go and I turned back to face the bar. ‘What’s the matter?’ she goes, ‘Don’t you like making new friends?’ ‘No one likes making new friends more than me.’ Right then I felt someone grab me from the other side. It was this girl I knew from my quad. She was wild about me, followed me around like a crazy hen with one of her chicks. She didn’t mean no harm. She was from Everett. I always figured she was a bit slow. She goes to give me a hug and I see her head yanking back—Tess had her by the hair!”

I laugh, picturing this.

He laughs with me and continues. “Tess shoved her clean across the room and yelled after her, ‘Get lost! I got here first!’ Then she sidled back up to me at the bar and goes, ‘Sorry if I interrupted
something private. She wasn’t your type.’ ‘And you are?’ So she goes, ‘Maybe.’ I told her it didn’t matter what she thought ‘cause I picked my own friends. ‘You tied up anywhere?’ she goes. ‘I ain’t on anyone’s payroll, if that’s your meaning.’ ‘Looking for something in particular?’ she goes. I told her it’d been a while since I had a regular paycheck, so she goes, ‘I like a man who doesn’t run from trouble and knows how to keep his mouth shut.’

“She asked me if I knew how to handle a gun and I said yeah, then she asked me if I could handle myself in a fight and I said yeah, so she named her price. I liked her price and I told her so, and she ordered a round of drinks. We were about to make a toast when Tack comes up with his three Pit Bulls. He was staring at me with these cold suspicious eyes and started teetering on his heels like he was drunk, but I knew he was cold sober and lethal as a rattler. I sure had him fussed-up.

“‘Who’s this?’ he goes to her, meaning me. ‘Our new smuggler,’ she goes. ‘I don’t like you hiring new men without my say,’ he goes. ‘You gotta ask me first.’ Her eyes got real hard and she goes, ‘I own half this business,’ so he goes, ‘We’re partners. Partners work together.’ ‘And we need men. I found you a good one for the job.’ So then he goes, ‘We’ve gotta be careful about who we hire, Tess. We don’t know him. He could be undercover for all we know.’ She looked at me with this look on her face that told me she wasn’t running his game and she asked me if I was military or FEDRA or any of them government agencies. I told her to keep her damn job. It wasn’t worth the trouble. If she didn’t trust me, go ahead and hire someone else.

“Tack turns to me and asks me how much she offered me a month and I told him straight-up. He looked surprised, said those were fighting wages but he didn’t know if I could fight. Tess looks at me and goes, ‘Can you fight?’ and before I could answer, Tack goes, ‘Let’s find out,’ and he sics his thugs on me.

“I took most of the blows with my left arm. I caught the first one by his jacket, swung him around, and smashed his face against the bar. He went straight down. I caught another and flung him into the next. The whole room exploded around me. Folks scattered. I heard bodies crashing into tables, glasses and bottles smashing, and guns popping off. I went hard and cut them all down till they couldn’t get up no more, their faces laid open and their lips macerated.

“I started to get my bearings and I spotted Tess. She was sitting on the bar with her legs crossed, lady-like, with a big smile on her face. She’d been watching me the whole time. I heard the sirens and I pulled her from the bar. She landed right on top of me, pulled me closer, and kissed me hard. I kissed her right back. I felt like the biggest strongest man in the world. ‘You’re hired,’ she goes and I go, ‘Fine, but I’mma still pick my own friends.’ We ran outta there laughing like two kids who’d just gotten away with murder. Long about a year, I bought-out Tack’s half and we hitched up.”

My heart skips a beat. “You got married?” I ask, baffled, thinking hitched-up means married.

“Hitched-up in the Black.”

“Oh,” I say, disappointed. “I would’ve married her if I could’ve.”

He looks into his bowl with a tender reminiscent smile. This is a nice smile. I hope when I’m dead and gone, someone on this earth remembers me in the same way.
“If I ever get married,” I say to Joel, “it’ll be with a cowboy.” I think about this for a moment. Maybe I’d be as happy married to a man as I’d be married to a woman, so I add, “Or a cowgirl.” Why not? I never really thought about the warm wet pink holes between my legs accommodating anything other than myself or a man’s cock. A man’s hands. A man’s mouth. I suppose what’s between my legs doesn’t care about it one way or another. Why should it make any difference to me, either?

I could be very happy with a good man or woman at my side, as long as I can share my joy and trouble with them. It’s not that I can’t fend for myself. The point is, I’d already be cooking and cleaning for myself so doing it for someone else wouldn’t make that much of a difference. I want someone I can turn to when I need help or want comfort. Someone who worries about me when I’m sick. Someone I could go off on adventures with. Someone whose friends I could entertain. Chat with them, make them drinks, and pile their plates with food. I want a man or a woman to make love to me because they love me, not because they’re just physically attracted to me or need to patch-up an ache between their legs.

“And where do you reckon on wrangling up your cow-partner?” he asks.

I think about this. I have no idea where I’d meet anyone at all, better yet a cowboy or a cowgirl. Here we are in a normal house and I still don’t know the first thing about normal things like that. “How do you meet people?”

“Before the Critical—at work, at a party, or through friends. Someone you trusted picked-out someone for you and set something up. A blind date.”

“A date with a blind person?”

“It’s just an expression. You’d write an ad and say something about yourself, and what you were looking for to see if you clicked.”

“With a total stranger?”

“Sometimes it was easier than dealing with well-meaning friends. Took the pressure offa things. You’d have coffee, or drinks, or dinner. Go take a drive somewhere. Go hiking, dancing, or to a concert or a movie, and stay out till sunrise. Go on vacation together. You’d like the same things, laugh at the same jokes, and share the same values. You’d be someone reliable he could turn to. A friend, a confidant, and a companion. You’d take care of him when he was ill and be someone who lights his fire.”

“You mean sex?”

He clears his throat. “Passion’s important.”

“What’s my cowboy like?”

“What’s your notion?”
“A square chin, a lean jaw, and steady blue eyes,” I say, thinking of Tommy. Lithe but powerful. “And a rifle and a shotgun and a horse and a dog.”

“A red-blooded cowboy,” he says. “Dead set on setting things straight in the world. He always goes where there’s trouble and settles it. Reliable, trustworthy, and honest. Fearless and honorable. Fair-dealing and hard-working. He listens good, talks little, and he never goes back on his word.”

“He’s got a big cowboy hat with a big brim,” I say.

“He always shucks it on before shucking-on his boots. Short heels and jingling spurs with his pants stuffed into them. He’s got a bandana tied around his neck and leather wristbands shiny from rope. And cartridge belts around his waist, crossed and sagging at his hips. Big handled six-shooters in open holsters tied down to his thighs.”

“You’re the best shot in the whole world,” I say.

“Like a flash of lightning!”

“Figured my gun hand had slowed.” He flexes his hand theatrically.

“You’re as fast as ever and your eye’s just as quick.”

“The most accurate?”

“Guns blazing death!”

He laughs. “Could I shoot the ace outta a card from 100 miles?”

“Easy.”

“Shoot the cigar outta your mouth and the buttons offa your jacket?”

“With your eyes closed!”

“Shoot a flea offa dog’s butt from a hundred miles away?”

We laugh and slowly sober.

“I’d only marry someone who loves dogs,” I say.

“You’re in luck,” he says. “Cowboys love dogs. You’d have a Golden Retriever and a Chocolate Labrador. And a nice big yard for them to run around, with a big patio, a barbeque, a pool, an SUV, and a big pick-up in the driveway. You’d get up at the crack of dawn, feed your family, and get them off to work and school. Then you’d tidy the house, hit-up the gym, go shopping, have lunch with your friends, run errands, and pick up your kids from school. You’d cook dinner while you waited for your partner to come home from work with the front light on, the back door open, and the table set with dinner ready. You’d be a perfect homemaker. An attentive wife and mother.
Cheerful, understanding, and practical. Thrifty and smart. You’d balance the bank statements and never dent the cars. Sounds about right?”

“Sounds safe,” I say.

“Safe was normal. Men weren’t born of blood. No violent impulses, no brutal instincts, no blood spilled. You went your whole life and never saw a fight or a dead body. Those were the notions of nightmares. Man was harmless. He didn’t have enemies. Evil could be shunned. You didn’t ever have to meet it your whole lifetime. Guns were locked away. You didn’t live with them in your hand and didn’t greet no one with a rifle. No one lived thousands of miles from a clean bandage and a papercut didn’t need an amputation. Travel wasn’t something to be afraid of and you didn’t have to be hardy to do it. No leaning fences, no broken roofs, no smashed glass. Nothing was boarded-up, rough, dirty, or neglected. Everything broken got repaired.”

“I can’t imagine it,” I say.

“Well it can’t be undone. Terrible things happened and you have to make the best of it. Times change and you change with it. You just get on with things, forget who you were, where you came from—”

Clang! Joel’s empty bowl bounces over the carpet. I look at him and it’s clear he fell asleep spontaneously, his bowl having slid from his relaxed hand, mid-sentence.

He rouses and stretches down the couch on his back. He yawns, rubs the back of his head, and scratches himself under the armpits like always.

I blow-out the candles, go back to the couch, and lay on my back with my head on the armrest, at the opposite end of him. I fight the urge to sleep. I want to savor the tranquility, cleanliness, and orderliness of this beautiful house. I’m bathed and clean with a full belly though the food starts to repeat on me. The spices, the chemicals. I’ll never be able to sleep. I whisper his name. He doesn’t respond. “Are you awake?” I ask.

“Sleep,” he says through sluggish lips.

“I’ve never felt less like sleeping in my whole life.”

“Say your prayers and go to sleep.”

“I don’t know any prayers.”

“The Lord is my Shepherd?”

I don’t know what he’s talking about.


“Creepy.”

He clears his throat. “Oh Lord, God almighty, thank you for this here bounty. I shall want no more. Tomorrow if you’d be so kind, please send over a nice tender plump juicy baby calf. And please send one over for Miss Ellie. I’ve been hankering for a plate of baby beefs for as long as a month of Sundays.”

We laugh and slowly sober.
“Tell me a story,” I say.

He sighs. “What kinda story?”

“A ghost story?”

“I might could know one.”

“Yes! Please!”

“Swear you’ll go to sleep?”

“I swear!”

He clears his throat and cues-up his story. “Once upon a time, way out yonder in a valley between two big mountains, there lived a farmer. No wife and no kids. He lived all alone on a big old hog farm out past a covered bridge, a burnt-out barn, an old abandoned silver mine, and a burnt-out saw mill rotting away with its great saw still in place, rusty and unmoved for decades.

“Late fall one cold October day, he got a hankering for pigs’ feet. Now, all farmers know butchering’s only done under the darkness of a new moon but there was a full moon that night and he wanted pigs’ feet something powerful.”

“Why a new moon?” I ask.

“It runs to grease, shrinks in the pan. So under the moonshine shining bright, he butchered his fattest plumpest hog and made a big old pot of pigs’ feet. He ate himself full and went to bed as a thick fog rolled in. Somewhere in the middle of the night, he bolted upright outta bed, outta a deep sleep. He swore he heard something big coming-up from the old saw mill across the road. By and by, a voice rose-up outta the fog. ‘Where are my feet? Gimme my feet!’

“He shucked into his overalls and boots, grabbed his shotgun, and crept downstairs. He snapped opened the curtains and looked out over the yard. Nothing. Not a single shadow in the moonlight, not a single track in the frost. The voice spoke again. ‘Where are my feet! Gimme my feet!’

“He opened the front door, aimed his shotgun into the fog, and shouted, ‘If you’re a man, there ain’t no man on this earth I fear! If you’re an angel, you won’t bring me no harm! If you’re the Devil, come on inside and I’ll match you blow for blow!’

“He waited and waited but nothing showed itself. By and by, he felt foolish, figured he’d had a bad dream, and went back inside. Just as he kicked-off his slippers and climbed back to bed, he heard the voice again, only this time it was closer, coming from somewhere deep inside the house. ‘Where are my feet? Gimme my feet!’ He snuck back downstairs with his shotgun and tip-toed down the hallway till he heard a faint rustling coming-up from the old stone chimney, so he took out his flashlight and shined it way up there.”

I feel Joel’s arm come down the couch and his hand closes around my ankle. He shakes it, shrieking falsetto. I kick him away, squealing and laughing.

“‘God almighty! What are them big red eyes for?’ he yells, his voice affecting the farmer’s terrified tenor twang. ‘Better to hunt you with!’ he yells, his voice affecting the monster’s deeply-graveled roar. ‘What are them big claws for?’ ‘Better to dig your grave!’ ‘What’s that big bushy tail for?’ ‘Better to sweep-off your grave!’ ‘What are them big teeth for?’ ‘Better to eat you up!’”

He grabs my foot again. He draws it to his mouth and gnaws on my ankle like an old dog with a
bone. I squeal and gently kick him away. He laughs good-naturedly and settles back into the couch. I’ll never forget this. Joel playful and unburdened, as uncomplicated as the sun. This is how Joel should always be, I think to myself with a smile. A moment later, I’m overcome by sadness with the realization this is who he must’ve been before the Critical, before his daughter was murdered. What a shitty world.

“Too scared to sleep?” he asks.

“I’m not scared.” I scoff.

He shushes me. “Hear that?” he asks, his voice alarmed.

My pulse quickens and my ears strain against the silence. He grapples with something on the coffee table. His flashlight. He clicks it on and aims it at the wall behind my head. “Now ain’t that something?”

I follow his flashlight beam, which is shining on the large marble fireplace. I yelp, scramble from the couch, and cower behind the armrest at his head. “Asshole!” I yell playfully. His stories are always so vivid, like he’d been there himself, even made-up ghost stories like this. I know I shouldn’t be so gullible but I always believe him.

“I thought you said you weren’t scared of ghosts,” he says.

“I’m not sleeping here!”

Them loungers upstairs looked awful nice. Reckon you’ll sleep like a bear in the winter. I’ll be right here when you wake up.”

“I’m not sleeping alone!”

“No such thing as ghosts. Come’re.” He pats the cushion at his side. I bound onto the couch and lay on my back at his side, our outside shoulders touching. “How are you scared of ghosts after what’s out there?” he asks.

“I can’t kill what I can’t see,” I say.

“Sure enough. No weight to hang, no stomach to poison, no throat to cut, no shoulder to target.”

“I never believed in ghosts till the cemetery.”

“Say again?”

“Sister Camille’s. I swear there was something in my bed that night.”

“The only thing in that bed with you was your imagination.”

“There was something moving around the bed, over the sheets. I swear I didn’t imagine it. It woke me up twice. You didn’t feel it?”

“No such thing as ghosts.”

“I figured the cat snuck in.”

“I don’t doubt your word for the world but I would’ve been sneezing-up a storm.”

“You really don’t believe in them?” I ask, meaning ghosts, though I know he only believes in cold
logic.

“I never did before and I reckon it’s too late to start now.” He rubs the back of his head and sighs deep. “I’d some strange dreams that night.”

“You never dream.”

“If I do, I don’t remember them.”

“Nightmares?”

“Dreamt I was back in Texas Territory. With Sarah.”

“Oh—”

“Real vivid, like this whole damn thing never happened.” He pulls up a fist and cracks his knuckles in his other hand. “It was springtime with that pure white light and soft sweet air. I rode up on a black horse and tied him up at the porch. Inside was the same old furniture, the same old photos, the same old everything. I went up to her room and found her windows wide open. Out back, there was a garden with flowers growing all over trellises. Everything was in bloom. She was down there in a long white dress, carrying a watering can. I couldn’t see her face. She was wearing a big straw hat. She was about the same age as you. She was walking down the rows, humming a song I’d never heard before. She didn’t see me, didn’t know I was there.”

What a beautiful dream, I think to myself. He must’ve been very happy to see her so content, tranquil, and safe. “Sounds like she was at peace,” I say.

“What’s that matter?” he asks, his voice acerbic. His manner’s gruff and injured. “Why should I be alive when the ones I love are dead?”

What do I say to that? There’s nothing to say to that. I wonder what it’s like to be in love forever with someone who’s long dead. What’s the point? I suppose it’s like being in love with God. This abstract thing you love unconditionally.

Joel’s not a dreamer. He’s a realist. But if he could make one wish, it’d be to see her again. Even if it was just one more time. He’d never admit it but I know he wishes he could go back home to Texas Territory. Go back to the home he owned. Go back to a time when he could keep the doors and windows wide open. A time when he could take a nap on the couch and be woken-up by her smiling face.

Nothing I could say could fix his heartache and ease his pain. I dig around for his hand till I find it and I lay mine over his, expecting him to shy away. I don’t care. I do it anyway. He doesn’t flinch or resist. He takes my hand in his and guides it over his chest, right above his heart. He squeezes my hand tight. I’ll never forget this as long as I live. His heart beating beneath my hand and his warm hand holding mine like it’s the only thing still holding him to this world. I’ve never felt anything like this with anyone. Being someone’s anchor. Someone’s light. I’ll never forget this feeling with him. Not ever.
“Quit fussing,” Joel says. He’s got one hand on my neck and the other holds a comb, combing my damp hair. I sit between his legs in the middle of the large cedar gazebo. He sits in a patio chair above me. The tines snag a tangle and my head tugs backward.

“Too rough!” I yell.

“You’re all knots,” he says. “Next time, use conditioner.”

“What’s that?”

“The stuff that takes out knots.”

If I’d had the good fortune of being born before the Critical and growing-up in this house, I would’ve stayed out on this gazebo all day and night, and watched everything. Birds, insects, and creatures. At night, I’d watch the moon and the stars swing above. I’d ask Joel about everything. What do all these creatures eat? How long do they live? What do they do all day? I’d ask him till he ran out of answers and told me to shut up.

I’m struck by a feeling of melancholy. I realize how different of a person I would’ve been if I’d been born in a different time. This place makes me realize Boston was a total slum. When I lived there, I didn’t think it was all that bad. We had hot meals, candlelight when the electricity cut out, and warmth in the winter. Jackson was rural but things were kept as clean as they could be. I didn’t even know luxury like this existed in the world. Privacy and peace. Everyone’s entitled to it.

He snips my ends with large shears and combs my hair until he catches another stiff knot. I shout in protest. “Hush!” he yells. “I ain’t trying to hurt you.”

“You could kill someone with that comb!” I think about this for a moment. “Could you kill someone with a comb?”

“When they come at you, use whatever you’ve got.”

“Even a comb?”

He draws my body loosely into a rear overarm hold and slashes the comb across my neck. I play along, gurgling and moaning melodramatically. He lets me go and I flop onto my side, floundering like a fish out of water. He laughs freely. I sit up and squeeze myself back between his legs so he can finish.

“Works better with a blade,” he says. He sweeps my hair from my neck and taps on my collarbone. “Right there. When you pull out the blade, slash hard and make the wound as big as possible. Once the artery’s severed, it’ll bleed-out in a couple seconds. It’s a good silent attack.” He takes my chin in his hand and stabs the comb where my jaw meets my earlobe, demonstrating another attack.

“Always keep your wits about you. Every single species in the world has a little trick—an evasion—that’ll save their lives in a moment of great need. Find it and improve on it.”

“I’d run,” I say, thinking about one of his adages. The quick and the dead. He always says there’s
two kinds of people left in this world—the quick and the dead.

“You can’t outrun death,” he says.

“The quick and the dead! I’m quick. I’d run.”

“You can’t run quicker than a bullet. Don’t even waste a single breath. Don’t go looking for trouble but don’t run from it, and if you get into a fight, make sure you win.”

Win a fight. Sure. Easy for him to say with his big fists and big muscles but I can’t win against most of my opponents. Physics, you know. “Surrender and beg for mercy?” I ask.

“No begging. Better you steal than beg. You’re never gonna win a battle by throwing-up your hands and begging for mercy. Pride doesn’t seek charity. It ain’t the way.”

“Then what do I do?”

“Never surrender. Never swear you’re dead before the shot’s been fired. Life’s a battle for supremacy. Excitement’ll distract you and distraction means defeat. The man who plays in cold blood always wins. You take refuge. Gather your wits and brace for revenge. If you can’t find a way, make one, and sweep-on before the blood has time to dry.”

I don’t like thinking about these kinds of things because I hope he’ll always be at my side, fighting my battles with me. He hands me the comb and scissors. He’s done with my hair. I stand behind him and push my belly against the chair’s backrest. We both woke with swollen faces and tender bloated torsos. We’re not used to so much leisure and unburned calories. All that dry food stored away in the pantry. I haven’t pooped in two days.

“Find any new greys?” he asks.

“None.” I won’t even think about him growing old.

“Not too short. You know I like it long.”

“Hair grows back.”

“Nature’s way. Every inch of earth, cradle or grave. Every plant, shelter or fuel. Every animal, eat or be eaten.”

“It’ll go on forever?”

“Nothing’s eternal. Even the stars in heaven’ll dim and grow cold. Till then, animals will mate, eat, mature, die, rot, and fertilize the next generation. It’s only a matter of time till you’re chewed, digested, and turned into fuel for a maggot, an ant, or a wolf. We’re just scared little critters scurrying around this great big earth. We mature, breed, and die.”

“There’s gotta be more to life than that,” I say.

“Man does exactly what he reckons. He sets down his morals, succeeds if he stokes the flames high enough, and struggles if he doesn’t. You’re precisely what your desires make you.”

“What happens when we die?”

“Nothing. Oblivion. You fade away. Drop into the vast silence from which you came.”

“That’s it?” I ask, incredulous. “No turning into stars? No Heaven and Hell? No rebirth?”
He scoffs. “You’re among the living, the vast minority. Every day’s an endless struggle. You’re lucky enough to make it to bed-down every night.”

“A fly can do that,” I say. “A bird can do that.”

“What more do you want?”

“I don’t know.” I exhale one long breath. “I wanna make the lives of others easier. Ease sorrow, bring comfort. Do good for the world. Make people happy.”

He sniffs contemptuously and groans disgust. A horrible groan, edged in revulsion. He hates everything I just said. He gets up from his chair and gestures toward the pool house. I hadn’t even started cutting his hair, he’s *that* annoyed with me. “Go on, get inside. The sun’s on its way down.”

“Yeah, Joel. It does that every day.”

He bridges his hips and glares at me hard, his eyes full of contempt. “Something’s bothering you, Ellie?”

“What’s wrong with wanting to make people happy?”

He looks around the yard like he’s looking for a place to dig a hole and bury me deep. “In this world of dread and destruction?” he yells. “Death and suffering everywhere you look and you’re wanting to make people happy? The way of life’s just one long feat of endurance. Dull and bloody grind. A bitter endless fight. Grief and sorrow are man’s inheritance. Happiness doesn’t exist and I can’t remember a time when it ever did. It’s a fable. Fairy tales. That word’s vanished from this world. Do yourself a favor and get rid of it.”

“But if every second lived is one more closer to death, why not make each one as good as possible?”

He shakes his head, no. “That’s a goddamn foolish notion. You’re talking like a damned fool. But if you’re so determined to be one, there ain’t nothing more I can do about it.”

Joel never sleeps past dawn. He says it’s when the French and the Indians attack. As long as I’ve known him, he’s always been up with the sun or before it.

Face puffy and lined in sleep, he wakes mid-morning with a scowl and scolds me for not waking him up with the sun. Like it’s my fault he overslept. Listless and lethargic, he brews-up coffee, lays on the couch, and falls back asleep without touching it. Not even a sip. I thought he was just in one of his moods but this upsets me. A voice in my gut says something’s coming off. I don’t want to believe it, don’t want to listen.

He wakes late afternoon with that look of blank fear in his eyes. He looks at me sitting on the couch at his feet, reading a book, and his face softens. Recognition dawns in his eyes. He asks me if it’s morning or night. I don’t like this question so I don’t answer him. He asks me to fetch a thermometer. I run to the bathroom and find one. He tucks it to his mouth, takes it out way too soon, and curses under his breath. I ask him what’s wrong and he tells me not to get to worrying, so
of course, I get to worrying. He gets up and heads toward the large bedroom at the back of the house and I follow him with a candle. He strips down to his briefs, crawls into bed, and tunnels below the comforter. He mutters, 'Night.

Though the day had dawned clear and bright, dusk brings a blanket of clouds and soft grey drizzle. The air in the house feels close, heavy, and humid. It puts me on edge, makes me feel uneasy. While Joel sleeps, I sit at the kitchen island and reinforce the buttons on his flannel shirt with a thread and needle until my hands get too sweaty, and the needle slips from my fingers.

I start tidying-up and pause. I swear I heard something. I listen and the sound comes again, coming from the bedroom where Joel sleeps. I can’t figure out this sound. At first, I think it’s his voice but his voice doesn’t sound like that. I hear it again. No, it’s definitely his voice. It stops abruptly, followed by a long unnerving silence. In my head, I imagine he’s having a bad dream and calling-out in his sleep. I saw him have one of these bad dreams once while we were drifting. Bad salmon. He couldn’t keep anything down all night. I only had a couple bites so I only got bad cramps and the shits. Between bouts of puking, he trembled and shook, and called-out gibberish in his sleep. It would stop for a while and start right back up again. It lasted all night. I didn’t sleep that night, watching him and worrying about him. In the morning, he didn’t mention it and neither did I. I was so relieved he was feeling well enough to travel again.

I go to the bedroom and watch him from the doorway. I find him sitting-up in bed with his back against the headboard and his legs sprawled down the mattress. He doesn’t see me. He stares straight ahead at the big piece of furniture against the opposite wall, the awareness driven from his empty feverish eyes. He looks at his hands and starts pulling at his fingers as if he’s trying to peel-off his skin, like he’s wearing gloves and trying to pull them off but they won’t come off. What’s he doing? Why’s he doing that? I go into the room and stand at his side for a better look.

“What are you doing?” I ask him, baffled.

He looks at me with wild hollow eyes, his pupils dilated black. “Sarah!” he yells, his voice clipped and distressed. “Sarah!”

The hair rises on the back of my neck and my mouth goes dry. He thinks I’m her. I can see it in his blank eyes. He’s no longer here. His mind’s gone somewhere else, somewhere no one else can find him. I take the candle from the bedside dresser and hold it to my face. “I’m not Sarah, Joel. I’m Ellie. Look at me, Joel. I’m Ellie.”

His blank eyes flash a look of surprise mixed with pain. The mental kind of pain. Like his heart’s breaking into a million pieces. “I kept calling you,” he says. “Didn’t you hear me?”

“I’m Ellie, Joel. I’m not her. Do you understand?” He doesn’t understand. I can see it in his eyes as he searches my face. I can read his desperation and confusion, his pain and heartbreak.

“I knew you were here,” he says, “knew I’d find you.” Like a switch turning off, he forgets about Sarah and turns his attention back to his hands, tugging at his fingers. He mumbles nonsensical incoherent words as he does this. I don’t like the sounds he’s making. I don’t like them at all.

“Help me get them off!” he yells, his voice panicked and desperate. “They’re too small.” He wrenches at his fingers with great effort. I worry he’s going to hurt himself. “Something ain’t right!”

“You’re fine, Joel,” I say.

“They’re too small!”
He’s hallucinating. This is clear. He’s hallucinating I’m Sarah and something’s wrong with his hands.

He moans anguish, deep and chilling. He grinds the heels of his hands into his eyes like he’s trying to drive away whatever he’s seeing. He flags his hands in front of his face. “But I see them!”

“Your hands are fine.” He’s having some kind of fit. He needs to come back to me. He needs to come back to this world. I take his hands into mine. Beyond the appeal of reason, he yanks them away. He rips aside the comforter and hurls it to the floor. I gather it from the ground and spread it over his legs.

“No!” he yells and kicks it to the floor, sobbing. “It’s too hard!”

I don’t know what to do. I don’t even know if I should touch him. I’m worried he’ll react with violence because he doesn’t know who I am. I climb onto the bed and touch his shoulder, waiting for a struggle. It doesn’t come. He treats me like I’m not even here. I shake him gently and call-out his name. His body burns with fever. His skin’s clammy and hot to the touch. His eyes are empty and vacant. I guide him back down to the mattress.

“Go back to bed, Joel,” I say. “You need to sleep.” He closes his eyes as his head hits the pillow. I lay on my side, facing him and watching him, too worried to take my eyes off him.
“Howdy, Tess.”

I wake from the sound of Joel’s voice spoken in a way I’ve never heard before. Soft, tender, and unguarded. Suffused with affection and sweetly drawled. He’s never used that tone of voice with me. He used it for Tess. I don’t care. Why should I? I’m happy he’s no longer having hallucinations about Sarah, happy he’s moved onto Tess. Less sadness there. Her death was noble, a heroic sacrifice. She died a martyr. At least they got to say goodbye to each other. We didn’t actually see her die. We heard the shots pop off and heard her wail in death. I’ll never forget that sound as long as I live. It was bad but there are plenty of worse ways to die. I picture them living together in Boston and it’s a nice feeling. I suppose he’s having a nice dream about her. Maybe Tommy’s there, too.

Judging by the candle wick on the bedside table, we’ve been asleep for a couple hours. He sleeps facing me, curled fetal on his side with one arm folded beneath his head and the other tucked childlike between his thighs. His face’s flushed and shiny. I lay the back of my hand across his forehead, burning with fever. Maybe it’s not fever, I tell myself. The whole bedroom’s stifling. I’m burning-up, too, covered in sticky sweat. Maybe it’s just really hot in here.

I sit up, acutely aware of my damp clothes stuck to my sweaty skin. I strip to my underwear, drink a glass of water from the bedside dresser, and blow-out the candle. Pitch black. Good. I want to sleep this day away, forget about Joel’s hallucination with Sarah. I don’t want to think about these terrible things. Joel being sick. Joel searching for Sarah, the one who'll always be lost. Goodnight, Joel, I tell him silently. You’ll be better in the morning. You’d better be.

I flop onto my side, facing away from him. I feel him shift across the mattress and spoon against me, his skin feverish and sweaty. My heart skips a beat. Here’s the thing and I’ve said it plenty of times. Joel and I don’t spoon. We sleep facing each other, back-to-back, or shoulder-to-shoulder. Spooning’s too intimate. He enforces this rule because he made it himself. He breaks his rule again as he throws his arm over my shoulder and pulls me closer. This won’t do. This won’t do at all. Just as I start pulling away, he speaks.

“Where in the hell have you been keeping yourself, Tess?” he asks, his tongue thick and sluggish in sleep. “I ain’t seen you in a week.” He pauses and speaks again. “Who told you that? Swampscott Sprouse? That low-down thief. I reckon he forgot there’s a thing called consequences. If he doesn’t go, I’ll kill him.” He goes quiet for a moment and speaks again, his manner becoming agitated but his voice thick in his mouth. “You can’t hand me that sorta raw deal and make me like it, Tess. He’s messing with the wrong man. He can’t wiggle his way outta it. Can’t stop what’s bound to happen if he doesn’t lay off this deal.” His manner changes and he speaks in a sheepish tone. “Reckon I got a little too hot-headed. I’m apologizing.”

He touches my hip and starts feeling-up my belly, running his fingers into my navel. What is this? What’s he doing? I grab onto his arm and call out his name. He takes my breast in his hand and squeezes it against my chest. I feel it disappear completely beneath his big warm hand and it feels amazing.

No, I tell myself. Get away from this. Leave this. Anything would be better than this. Get up. Get
up now and go sleep on the couch. The loungers. The master bedroom. Anywhere but here. Sleep in the whirlpool. Remember how nice and cool the porcelain felt against your skin? For God’s sake, go now. Go now before it’s too late. I listen to reason. Just as I reach toward the edge of the mattress, he wings his outer leg over mine, pinning me down. He buries his face against the back of my neck. He digs his fingers beneath my bra and massages a breast, grinding my nipple till it grows firm and hard beneath his hand. His hips start rocking against my ass like he’s slowly fucking me. His cock finds the valley between my ass cheeks and he slowly fucks himself through my underwear. He’s not hard enough to give me a good fucking but he’s very close.

Stop thinking about his cock and how ready he is to fuck, I tell myself. Get away from this. Leave this. He doesn’t know what he’s doing. He isn’t all there. He thinks you’re Tess. He thinks he’s fucking a dead woman. He’s having a wet dream. A wet hallucination. Are you just going to lay here and let him rub his cock all over you? Oh, that cock. He’s rubbing it right where I need it, fucking himself against that maddening ache between my legs. I’m already starting to soak-through my panties. His body’s burning up and so is mine. He’s ready. I’m ready.

You still have a choice here, I tell myself. I mustn’t do it—but I find myself doing it. Slowly fucking myself against his cock through the damp fabric of my underwear, throwing off that dirty animalistic heat. He pulls me closer. He holds onto me like I’m the only thing keeping him rooted to this world and he’ll never let me go. It burns something deep inside me. This feeling of nearness and closeness with him.

What are you still doing here, you wicked girl, I ask myself. He’s right here. That’s why. He’s got a big hard cock and it’s in the perfect condition to fuck away my ache. It’s reason enough. I tell myself I’m not permitted to have this. Not this. Something bad will happen if I let myself have this. Then why does it feel so good, I ask myself. This is a million times better than my fantasies. This is real. I’m not fantasizing this. This indecision isn’t good. No good will come of this. Choose. Choose, dammit! I choose. I slip my body against him and tug down my panties. I’ve made my choice. It would kill me to let myself fall in love with a man like Joel. I know this. Nobody has to tell me this. We’re not allowed to have this. But here we are, me and him, and it goes. God help me, it goes.

I rub myself between my legs and feel nothing but the slipperiness, the bareness, and the heat coming off of my twat. I can’t hold myself still, slowly fucking myself against him. I play with myself, stroking and petting. He doesn’t even have to fuck me. I could come just like this. I could do this all night.

I feel his hand reach between his legs and dig around his boxers. He pulls out his cock and urges the head between my ass cheeks, searching for the warm wet place he needs to set it. A moment of panic sets in. He’s huge. As thick as my wrist. I knew he was big but it didn’t mean anything to me because something like this was never supposed to happen between us. Well it’s happening and it can’t be stopped. Will he let me spread myself wide open with my fingers, set the head of his cock against my little hole, and slowly fuck myself down his shaft like I did with Tommy? Because that’s the only way I can get such a big cock through such a little hole, a hole that’s way too small for him. What if he gets violent because he doesn’t know who I am? What then?

I feel him climb behind me and his cock’s inside me before I know what’s happening. I feel him ramming-in the head and squeezing the rest of himself in, his balls brushing against my thighs. I kick-out hard and open my mouth to scream. Nothing comes out but startled gasps. I start panting. There’s not a single part of my body I’m able to hold still. I feel his cock burning-up all through me and it feels like it’s never going to stop. The fit’s so tight, I don’t know how he’s going to pull himself out without pulling-out my insides along the way.
The more I kick, the deeper he pushes his cock inside me till there’s no more of his cock to push inside. I feel his cock stretching me wide and splitting me open, spreading itself everywhere. Soon enough, I stop thinking about anything but how wonderful his cock feels inside me. I reach down a hand between my legs and I feel my whole naked slippery twat bulged with his thick cock fitted deep and tight inside me, nothing outside my body but his thick bush and his balls.

He sets his cock deeper and starts to fuck me. He fucks me like he’s trying to drive his cock straight through me. Like he’s trying to lose his cock inside me. It’s so hot and wet, I’m already coming. I grab onto his arm tight and I come, trying to pull myself as close as I can, fucking into him as hard as I can. He continues to fuck me through my orgasm. Oh, that orgasm. Everything between my legs feels like it’s turning inside out, boiling from the heat of his cock. I come and I come, and it’s not enough. God in Heaven, it’ll never be enough. He’s right here but he’s not close enough. I need him to fuck me till he fucks out my ache. Fuck himself so deep I’ll feel him even after he’s long gone.

He pops out his cock and pushes me onto my belly. He gets behind me and hoists my ass in the air. He squeezes the head of his cock into me and fucks the rest of himself in after it. It’s a tight fit, but it goes in slowly and smoothly, my split already fucked far apart. He sets his cock deep inside me. I feel the whole length of him stretched out over me and his muscles gathering-up, and he starts to fuck me. I fuck myself against him, lifting my ass sky-high, letting his cock spread me everywhere. It’s not enough. I want to see all of him. I want to feel everything. See the whole length of his cock disappear inside me. God, I want to watch him fuck me.

The whole bed rocks as he fucks me. I worry it’s going to come down under us. Break the mattress in half. Fuck the bed right through the floor. He drags me around the bed as he fucks me. He fucks me to the edge of the bed, then hauls me back to the middle with his cock set deep inside me, and fucks me back over to the other side. We could go on fucking like this forever. All this slipping and grinding and pounding against each other till one of us dies.

I put my hand between my thighs to feel what it feels like, slippery in wetness and hot as a furnace. I feel his cock slipping in and out of me, and his wet bush mopping against me. I play with myself and I start to come. I realize he’s coming, too, because his cock’s submerged inside me, lost in heat and wetness as he fucks me. He fucks me so fiercely, I feel his come scattering like spray behind me.

He pulls himself out very slowly and rolls off me onto his side, gasping. I sprawl on my back, my muscles spent and aching, my twat totally fucked out. I feel his thick hot come sloshing around inside me. The bed’s soaked. There mustn’t be a single dry spot in the whole room, which smells like our sex, the air thick and sweet with it. The sweat of his balls and the smell of his come mixed with the sweet scent that came out of me as he fucked me. I feel his come dripping between my thighs, bubbling out of me. I want to reach up, smear it on my fingers, and taste it. His come mixed with mine. I want to take his cock in my hand and smell the smell of me on him.

His shifts over the mattress and twines himself into me, holding onto me tight. His body burns with fever. He mutters something. It sounds like he said, Tess.

He digs around for my twat, finds it, and holds it. Not to play with, but to hold. He holds it like he’s making sure it’s still there and it’s going to stay there. His hand stays there for a long, long time. I know this because I don’t sleep. Please don’t let me go, Joel, I tell him silently. I’d fall away from this earth without your hands holding me, I would. He’s the only thing in this world holding me to the ground.
Chapter Seventeen

The next day, Joel no longer leaves the bed, too weary and disoriented with fever to rise. His muscles are stiff and seized in pain. Jerky with tremors. His temperature fluctuates wildly and his body’s wracked in uncontrollable bestial shivering. I don’t know what’s happening to him but I don’t have time to think about it because I have to take care of him. When I’m not taking care of him, I’m sitting in an upholstered chair at his bedside, watching him sleep. He refuses to eat. This morning, I brewed-up chicken broth from bouillon cubes but he ignored my pleas and rolled away from me. He only wants cold water, parched in fever.

There are two buckets by his bedside. One is for his leavings. He can’t make it to the bathroom. I expect if I were ever sick like this, he’d do the same for me. The other bucket’s full of soapy water and a washcloth, which I use often to cool him down.

Earlier today, I rummaged every single drug in the house and studied them. I had to force myself to do this. I’m scared of drugs, unfamiliar and intimidating. I worry drugs will poison him. I found aspirin to treat his fevers so I wake him every four hours and give him a couple. He’s unresponsive when I do this so I have to slip the pills between his lips and rub water on them. I let him suck my wet fingers till he licks them down.

After his dusk dose, I lay a damp washcloth over his forehead and climb into bed. I watch him sleep and think about last night. Part of me feels like it never happened, like it was a dream. Did it really even happen? Of course it did. Every time I move my legs, I feel the tenderness from his fierce fucking. This morning when I woke, I was hit with a wave of panic at the thought of him knowing. Will he ever know? I don’t think he’ll ever know. As the hours pass, I stop worrying. He’ll never know. How could he? He’s no longer here. He’s departed the world where I am and he’s gone somewhere else. He thought I was Sarah. He thought I was Tess. He’s gone somewhere else where there’s dead people all around him. People who’re dead and gone. He’s revisiting his past. I don’t even exist in the timeline yet.

There’s no feeling of shame. No sense of trespass or regret. This was bound to happen. Sex with him felt like something we should’ve been doing all along. His muscles were firm, his cock was hard, and his hands were masterful. It’s like a dammed river that’s finally burst open. I feel whole and fragmented at the same time. I wouldn’t want to be with anyone else in this world nor be anywhere else in the world without him. I’ll go crazy if I can’t fuck him again. All I can think about is his big hard cock and all the beautiful things it did to me, and the way it made me feel. I want him to fill my whole body with his fucking. I’d give anything to just feel it again, to feel him squeeze himself into my body and fuck himself between my legs. It’s not enough to have other people fuck me. They can’t fuck away the memory of his cock. My life would be incomplete and empty if I died without doing those things with him again.

What I feel for him isn’t the same feeling I had for Tommy but I know it’s love all the same. Deep, permanent, solid, and unchanging. What’s love, then? What’s it all about? I have no idea. How would I know? I never felt it from a mother or a father. I suppose Joel doesn’t love me but cares deeply for me. He sees me as a responsibility. It took him a very long time to get to that point. I was so used to his scorn, always telling me what to do and how to do it. Then something changed. I don’t think it changed with him. I think it changed with me. I think I finally grew-up. I think that’s what happened.
I know this is true after a long time. What I feel for Joel is deep love. Not lust-love like what I had for Tommy. Not a distraction or a relief. Not the way he made me feel, like how Tommy made me feel like the most beautiful smartest girl in the world. I think I’ve been in love with Joel for a long, long time. No. I don’t think. I know. There are no doubts. It’s not even something to debate. God in Heaven, I love him. Love means nothing compared to what I feel for him. I adore him. I feel this love as a pure complete love and more complicated than I’ve ever felt for anybody or anything. I’ve tried to hate him. I’ve tried to convince myself he wasn’t capable of love. It’s something I can never ever tell him. I can’t use that word with him—love.

Why didn’t I just leave things alone? What kind of person am I, falling in love with him? Falling in love with someone unattainable. He’s out of reach. It makes no sense for us to fall in love. Maybe, I think to myself, it’s just a transference of my love for Tommy. Joel’s the closest living thing I have to his brother. But I think about this and I don’t think it’s the case. I can’t compare Joel to anyone else. There’s no one like him in the world.

He’s mine. He belongs to no other. He’ll always belong to me and no one will ever belong to him like I do. He’s mine by the right of the long hard years I’ve cared for him. He’s mine, he is. Nothing and no one will ever come between us. This is what I want. Nothing else. Wherever he is, he’s with me.

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I lid-up through a thick veil of sleep with an urgent sense of alarm. The first thing I notice is the bedside candle, burned-down to its last inch of wax, which means I’ve been asleep for at least four hours, which means I’ve slept through Joel’s next dose. I roll over and gasp. Joel’s awake. He’s on the mattress at my side, bridged on all fours. He punches his hands beneath the pillows and bedding. He’s clearly searching for something.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“My gun,” he says. “Where’s my gun?”

I glance at the bedside dresser where his revolver and pistol lay inches away. He’s too delirious and blinded with fever to see them. “You don’t need it, Joel.”

“Where is it?” he yells, his feverish eyes distant and hollow.

“You don’t need it!”

He scrambles from the bed and stares at the far wall. I look where he’s looking and I see nothing. But he does. He intently tracks something or somebody who’s not here. The hair stands-up along my arms. He must be hallucinating again. Seeing ghosts again. He clutches blindly at his strong-side waistband where he usually keeps his revolver. It’s instinctual. Nothing’s there. His gun isn’t there and he’s confused. He keeps digging at it, again and again, expecting it to be there in his hand. He cries-out in aggravation. After a couple more tries, he gives up. He speaks indiscernible gibberish in grave stern tones. I hate the sound of this. It makes the hair stand-up at the back of my neck.

His body trembles. He growls thunder like an injured beast. His mouth pulls into a thin colorless line, and his neck’s corded and swollen. “I saved her, I take her! She belongs to me! Don’t go near
her, don’t speak to her, don’t even look at her! Where she’s going ain’t none of your business and what she’s doing ain’t none of your business, either!” He looks at something only he can see for a long moment before speaking again. “I want you to know I know, Tommy. And I want you to know this: I’m taking her. You understand? I told you I’d kill you for that someday. You’ve got any particular place you’d like to say your last words?”

I hear this and it feels like the air’s been sucked out of the room. I realize he must be reliving the night of the washout. What happened with Tommy at the Vale.

He staggers to the glass patio doors and stares at his candlelit reflection in the dark casements. His eyes narrow and a mirthless grin takes over his face. “Don’t fool yourself, Tommy!” he yells at his reflection in the glass. “She doesn’t think nothing of you!” He pauses before continuing. “I ain’t asking your advice. You got that down? I can’t let you go on thinking it’s alright ‘cause it ain’t! I’m telling you this. If you get in my way, I’mma kill you!” He pauses momentarily, his entire body trembling, glossed and flushed with fever. “I ain’t leaving an unbroken bone in your whole goddamn body! I’m sending you where I’ve sent all them others who’ve tried to come after her—straight to Hell!”

He burps sickeningly and his shoulders spasm. He retches and vomit splatters the floor. He bends low and snarls vomit, gasping raucously between heaves. I grab the bucket and hold it under his head as he continues to puke. Dark thick liquid. Snarling puke. He’s eaten nothing in almost a week. Is it blood? Is it bile? Is it shit? Please, God, please make it stop, I say to myself, as I wait for him to finish.

When he does, I brace him up and lead him down the hallway to the bathroom. I sit him on the shower’s tiled bench. He holds his body like he’s just run a marathon, slumped against the wall. He convulses and his teeth chatter wildly. Vomit streaks his beard and chest. I set myself between his burning legs and clean him off with a soapy washcloth. He pulls me close and buries his head in my chest.

“I won’t ever leave you again,” he says, his voice sluggish and thick. “I won’t ever let him hurt you again.”

Joel’s not getting any better. How much longer will his fevers last? It’s been six days. How much longer can he survive this? Nothing seems to be working. When he was sick in the past and I cared for him, it was from his wounds. I stopped the bleed-out, sewed him up like a big piece of leather, and he was good to go. This is something else entirely.

It’s time for his dusk dose. I slip a couple aspirin into his mouth and he sucks the water from my fingers. I take a washcloth, and wipe-away the sticky sweat blobs beading his face and neck. His cheeks are burning-up. His jaw and neck are red and swollen. There’s nothing else to be done. I take his bucket of leavings and dump it outside. When I get back inside, I stop in the foyer and my blood ices. I hear him speaking gibberish from the bedroom. Please, not again, I say to myself. I can’t take anymore.

Crash! I hear the unmistakable sound of small objects clattering to the floor. I picture him hurling everything from the bedside dresser to the floor. It’s the first thing I picture from this sound. I run to the bedroom and find it just as I’d imagined. Everything that was on top of the bedside dresser
lays scattered across the floor.

He stands at the bedside in his boxers, his whole body sweaty and flushed. My scalp lifts in fear. He’s holding his revolver in his shaky hand, inspecting the ejected cylinder. Oh, God. I forgot to clear away his guns. You idiot, I yell at myself. He closes the loading gate with a flick of his wrist and looks at me with empty flat blank eyes, his cheeks swollen and feverish.

“They’re here,” he says plaintively as if I should know what he’s talking about.

“Who’s here?” I ask. “Joel, who’s here?”

He takes a couple big steps toward me, drags me to his side, and starts ushering me toward the door. I cry out and tear away from him.

“Come on!” he yells. He rushes clumsily into the hallway, bumping into the door frame as he passes through it. “They ain’t gonna wait!”

Bare feet slapping the tiles, he stumbles in a loping gait, careening into the walls and bracing himself against them. He’s lost all sense of balance and coordination. He mumbles disconnected gibberish in a low calm intonation. The hair at the back of my neck bristles. What do I do? Think, I tell myself. Think. I’ll cut him down and take his gun. Then I’ll tie him to the bed. If I can’t tie him to the bed, I’ll lock him in the room. That’s what I need to do. It has to be done. For his own safety. For mine, too.

I follow a couple steps behind him, ready to throw myself prone if he turns his gun on me. He careens through the front door, crosses the patio, and steps onto the lawn. He looks up at the sky. I look up, too. Tranquil twilight. Not a single cloud in the clear blue sky.

“There!” he yells and points at the sky. “I’mma bring them down!” He sways drunkenly across the lawn, tracking an invisible airborne squadron. “Hey!” Even sick with fevers, his voice is booming and thunderous, like a lion. He waves his arms in semaphore. “Over here!” Pack! He fires a .38 Special into the sky, the revolver’s long barrel flaming fluorescent orange against the indigo dusk. The wild shots ricochet the silent night, echoing madly off the side of the house.

I drop to prone, cover my head, and pray he doesn’t shoot himself in the foot or shoot me.

Pack! Pack! Pack! Pack! Pack! Pack! He triggers rounds into the sky until he shoots dryfire.

“Over here!” he yells, his voice hoarse. He sails his spent revolver skyward and maniacally waves his arms above his head, signaling to the phantom fleet only he can see. I high-crawl toward him and dive across his feet, intending to bring him down. He goes down easily, stumbling and crashing heavily onto his backside. I pin him to the ground on his back and he weakly fights against me. After a short struggle, he quiets and lays still, his eyes intently tracking the placid sky. Nothing’s up there, Joel, I yell at him silently. There’s nothing up there!

He looks at me with hopeless defeated vacant eyes. It’s not Joel who I see. It’s not him. He’s not here. I don’t know who it is but it’s not him. “Please,” he says. “Don’t let them board without us. I won’t leave without Ellie. Where’s Ellie?”

I choke back a sob. He’s gone from this world. He’s gone somewhere else and he’s never coming back. This is worse than if he physically left me. Being here and not being here at the same time. His body’s here but nothing else of him remains with me. I cradle his feverish face. Come back to me, Joel, I beg him silently. Come back. I need you here with me. Please, come back. A moment passes and blood rushes into my face. I’m consumed in choking anger. Why’s this happening?
Why won’t this stop? Am I next? Will we both die like this, hallucinating and burning with fever?

I struggle him upright and lead him across the lawn toward the house. He walks in a shuffling gait. His limbs hang slack and his head lolls his drooped shoulders. I tuck him into bed and sit vigil from my chair. His body convulses so violently, the entire canopy bed frame vibrates from his chills.

I cry softly into my hands, overcome by crushing hopelessness. I have the deep understanding there’s nothing more I can do for him. I feel completely alone and helpless. I suppose if I was raised by a mother, I’d look up to the heavens and pray for her supreme guidance. But I can’t do this. I don’t have a mother who taught me how to deal with these things. So I do the only thing I can think of. Something I haven’t done since I was ten-years-old. I wipe away my tears with the backs of my hands, intertwine my fingers, close my eyes, and pray.

Dear God,

I know it’s been a while. You don’t have to remind me. The thing is, I used to talk to you every night from the time I could speak till I was ten. I’m sure you remember me. You were the only one I could talk to. I stopped talking to you because I didn’t think you were listening. I asked you every single night to send my parents back to me. You weren’t listening or you didn’t care. They never showed-up. They never came back for me. I’m sure you know this. It doesn’t matter. The loss of them means very little to me now because I found someone who takes better care of me and shows me more love than they ever could. His name’s Joel. Joel Miller. I know he’s not my real family but he’s the closest thing I’ve ever had to a mom, a dad, a sibling, and a friend. He’s all I have. He’s all I’ve got in this world. I wouldn’t survive the loss of him.

I’m all alone and I’m really scared. I’m more scared than I’ve ever been in my whole life. You know the life I’ve lived and you know I’ve been through a lot of tough things. This is different. This is entirely different. I haven’t asked you for anything in the last six years but tonight I’m asking you for one thing. Please help me save Joel. I’m asking you with all my heart. Please don’t let anything bad happen to him. He’s the best man in the whole world. There’ll never be another man like him. If anything happened to him, the world would be empty. I couldn’t go on without him. Please let him get through this. Please make him better. Please heal him. In return, I promise I’ll take care of him for the rest of my life. I’ll never leave his side and I’ll never disappoint him. If he’s in a bad way, I’ll stand by him. Amen.
Chapter Eighteen

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Pop!

The rocketing champagne cork hits the ceiling and falls onto the counter top. I pour the champagne into the crystal flutes and stretch toward Joel for a toast, seated across from me at the kitchen island. “To no more fevers,” I say.

“To no more fevers,” he says.

We clink our flutes, burnished in candlelight, the shadows flickering the walls.

I suppose God was listening. The morning after my prayer, Joel’s fever finally broke. He thinks it might’ve been malaria so he’s been drinking bottles of tonic water he found in the bar suite. He spends a couple hours each day on a chaise lounge on the patio, soaking up the sun’s vitamins. It seems to be helping. Every day he walks a little bit taller and his pale face takes-on a bit more color.

“Eat,” I say, and gesture at his dinner plate of roasted rabbit and navy beans soaked overnight, simmered with wild rice. Under the early morning fog, I snared two plump does grazing near their wispy nests at the edge of the estate. After skinning, field dressing, and salt-soaking the flesh, we barbecued them on the patio grill island. It’s a nice change-up after all the dry processed pantry food of the past couple weeks.

“That there’s fine rabbit,” he says between bites.

“They saw me clear,” I say. “They didn’t run.”

“Twenty years ago, you couldn’t even look at one without it scurrying off. They’re losing the fear of man, running free, unsuspecting and tame. Little habitation, no traffic, and no industry to drive them back to the hinterlands. The first couple of years, they vanished. Burrowed deep into the countryside from hostiles and military, shifted their homes to distant remote lands, and swept out to the furthest roughest bleakest corners of the world. All animals, even in their wild state, lose the fear of man if they’re not threatened by harm. In twenty more years, they’ll probably be knocking on your front door, asking you to cook them up dinner. Fish’ll be jumping right outta the water into your pockets.”

I laugh at the thought of this. I’m thankful he’s well enough to make dumb jokes. “Do you like the rabbit?” I ask, noticing his appetite’s still weak.

“Didn’t eat much back in my day,” he says, poking at it with his fork.

“How come?” I ask.

“No one did. Kept them as pets.”

“No way.”

“Ain’t that something?”
“On leashes?”

“In cages.”

“Until you ate them?”

He laughs dryly.

Despite the cheerful mood and the freshly-cooked game, I’m downcast. Melancholy. I don’t know why this is. Maybe, I worry, now that he’s better, he’s going to want to move on. I don’t want to move on. I’m sick of drifting. This house is a good place. I could be happy living in this house. I could be happy living in this house with him. We’re safe here. Food, medicine, and fuel to last a lifetime. We could live here and grow old together. Take care of each other.

I stretch over the counter top and reach into a crystal serving bowl filled with candy. I feel lightheaded and my face is flushed. My balance is skewed. I suppose I’m buzzed from the champagne. I don’t think he’s drinking because there’s barely any champagne missing from his glass. I wish he were drunk. He’d be better off. We need to celebrate and mark this momentous occasion. He’s alive, after all. He survived his devastating fevers.

I pick-out a chocolate bar and peel back the thin gold-leaf wrapper. “You don’t like the champagne?”

“It’s fine,” he says.

“Did you drink in the Old World?”

“Once or twice a year. I’d say things into my glass, things I’d only say when I was drunk and wasn’t feeling like myself. And I’d regret everything I said.”

I snap-off a piece of chocolate and nibble it, making sure to chew it carefully. Chocolate’s a luxury, after all. Especially this bar, wrapped in gold. Gold! Food wrapped in gold. “Did all candy come wrapped in gold?” I ask. “Or just for rich people?”

“All folks,” he says.

What a wonder. The world’s full of wonders. “Think it’ll ever go back to that?”

“Back to what?”

“Fancy fixings. Gold-wrapped chocolate.”

“No,” he says and shakes his head, no. “Mankind’s broken down to the point where his soul’s worth less than a single match. Or nothing at all. No law, no judgment, no measure, no reason. Nothing to control his basest instincts. Violent impulses have become his survival. You can’t bring harvest from scorched earth.”

“But how are we any different?” I ask. “I’ve killed and you’ve killed. We’ve killed for each other.” I’m serious about this. I’m not trying to be argumentative. Okay, maybe I’m feeling a little bit argumentative because I’m a little drunk. Even if I wasn’t a little drunk, so what? We’ve both killed to survive. To protect each other from those who came to harm us. I know I’m only sixteen so the rest of my life feels like it’ll last an eternity but I’ll continue to kill to keep him safe as long as I live. It’s not a question. It’s a fact. I suppose that makes me no different than anyone else who’s still drawing breath.
He says my name but he says it in a way I’ve never heard before. Deep affection, some remorse, and a little bit of pity. I look at him directly and he says, “On this foul earth, there are folks beyond compassion, beyond reason, and beyond mercy. You ain’t one of them. You ain’t made of the same flesh and bone. That mercy’s a God-given grace. It can’t be learned.”

I drop my eyes. I suppose if anyone were to judge me based on what they knew of me, they’d say something like, ‘Look at that horrible wicked girl, always killing and stealing and swearing and fucking men she has no business fucking, and doing all sorts of horrible wicked immoral things.’ But Joel recognizes the goodness in me. I believe this. Even when he scolds me, he knows I’m not doing things the wrong way to be difficult. He knows I’m full of goodness.

I hear his chair skid back and I sense him stretching across the counter top toward me. His big hand reaches for one of mine and he takes it in his. He holds my hand like it’s the most delicate thing in this whole world, like it’s a precious fragile egg he’s scared to break. Listen, I’m used to feeling his hands on me. Shoving me around. Jabbing my shoulder to snap me out of a daydream. Yanking me back by my pack when I’m headed in the wrong direction. This is different. He’s touching me like I’m a delicate fragile little precious thing.

He says my name and asks me to look at him so I look at him. I’ll never forget this look, the great depth of warmth in his eyes and the deep lines etched into his forehead. “You bear my honor,” he says. “I did not give it to you lightly. There ain’t no one on this earth more precious or more worthy of my protection than you.” He lets go of my hand. I swallow my tears and tell myself not to cry. “They’ll try to take it away from you,” he continues. “Your compassion and your kindness. They’ll try to strangle it outta you but they won’t be able to, Ellie, ‘cause it’s bred into you. It’s bred deep into you.”

I know if I try to speak, I’ll cry, so I keep my mouth shut. I stare at my plate and try to steady my chin. I think this is what it must feel like when someone tells you they love you. It must feel just like this. The feeling of wanting to cry and wanting to smile at the same time.

He sits back in his chair and speaks to the room. “You weren’t around to see it, but the first couple of years, the seas and oceans were full of ships adrift. Captains, crews, and passengers were long gone. Vessels were abandoned and derelict. They drifted along without charts, anchors, or cargo, neither outward nor homeward bound. They’d collide, smash into harbors and ports, or they’d float along, drifting on tides and currents, changing course every hour till they crashed into the rocks, sunk to the bottom, or washed ashore thousands of miles away.

“You could try to keep clear of them and give them a wide berth but no one knew where they were gonna show up, or when or where they were headed. They were drifters, bound nowhere. Steering without helms, sailing without mainsheets, and floating without destinations or home ports. You couldn’t help them, couldn’t save them, couldn’t tow them, and couldn’t move them. You could only brace yourself for impact. They destroyed you all the same when they collided, and they kept floating on and on till they lay stranded, shipwrecked on a far-flung shore.”

He throws back his head and gazes at the ceiling. He exhales one long breath and crosses his arms over his chest. “I’ve been thinking. Had a lotta time. I thought about Jackson. Every day on guard duty, part of me wanted something to happen, every day the same as the last, nothing to break its lifelessness. Sometimes I got lonesome for the sound of howling coyotes, and the smell of wood fires and horse sweat, the sweetest smells in the world. I even found myself lonesome for hardships. Toughing it out. Bucking winter blizzards and spring wash-outs.”

He looks at me directly. His eyes are sunken and shadowed by dark circles. “I’m tired, Ellie. Tired of this whole damn thing. This useless senseless thing. Living one moment to the next, never
knowing if we’re gonna eat, sleep, or wake again. Homeless, no plans, no provisions. Drifting from nowhere to nowhere, to long-forgotten corners of this godforsaken world. My years left on this earth are far too few to be wasting my time with this nonsense. I’m too old to be living like a rabbit chasing after its own skin, scurrying for cover, hounds snapping at my heels. I dream of doing nothing, thinking nothing, and saying nothing. Just existing. I deserve a nice place to lay down my old bones when I’m ready to leave them behind. What do you reckon on quitting the trail?”

My lips part soundlessly. My eyes widen in disbelief. “No more drifting?”

“Reckon it’s time we cashed-in our last chips.”

“We’ll stay here?”

“Not my intention,” he says and glances around the room. “Never wanted more than what wasn’t already mine.”

“Boston?”

“Too many rovers scouring the shores.”

“What are you thinking?”

“You know I don’t need much. A small place in the sun and a nice green acre of land. Something that keeps-out the rain and keeps-in the warmth. Fish in the summer, venison in the fall, a cow for milk, a garden for vegetables, and fresh spring water.”

I need a moment to think about this. This is a radical change. It would mean the two of us, alone, in our own home. A remote spot to get away from it all. This is good. This isn’t some romantic fairy tale. This isn’t some fantasy he wants to explore. If Joel said this, it’s something he’s thought about long and hard. This is a practical thing. We’re fond of each other and we enjoy each other’s company. That’s all there is to it.

I realize he’s never known the peace and quiet of staying in one place with the person he loves. How long did it last in Texas Territory? Family life with Sarah and Jess—one year, maybe two? The Boston QZ with Tess? It wasn’t a peaceful existence by anyone’s yardstick. By living with him I’d be discovering myself and him. We’d grow together. We’d learn all the good and bad things about each other. If he loves me and I love him, what’s the harm? We’d learn so much from each other just by living so close.

If I say yes, things will never be the same. It would mean we’d be together till the last of us. It would mean the end of our independence and autonomy from each other. A house would mean caring for something shared and nurturing it together. It means he wants me by his side till he grows old. Living together means he’s not bothered by my bad habits and he’ll acquiesce to mine. It’s an exciting idea because I never thought anything like this would ever happen to me with anyone in my life.

It’s also scary. It fills me with fear and self-doubt. He wants an ordinary life. He wants to be left alone with me. He wants to grow old with me. He wants to build a home with me. How could I ever say no to that? I think love’s what keeps people faithful and loyal to each other. Not sex, not how you look, and not what you say. When two people want to live with each other till they grow old, what else could it be but love?

“Wherever you go, I go,” I say. “I’m all in.”

He smiles faintly, his eyes lilting. This is a nice smile, this smile.
“On one condition,” I say.

“What’s that?” he asks.

“Can I have a flower garden?” I laugh.

He laughs dryly into his plate. He likes this joke. I’m happy to have made him laugh. He repositions his cutlery over his plate, pulls to his feet, and stretches like a bear. “Reckon sleep suits me.”

“No!” I yell. “Not yet! You didn’t finish your rabbit! Or touch your champagne. And now we’ve really got something to celebrate!”

“I’m still run down.”

“You were really sick.”

“Thanks are too cheap to tell you how I feel.”

“I was worried.”

“I was in a mighty bad way. It would’ve been a bad time if we hadn’t have been here.”

“Do you remember the hallucinations?” I ask.

He drops his eyes and scratches his beard with the back of his hand. “Got them as a child. Hands would shrink up, everything would get rock hard. Sarah got them, too.”

“I was gonna tie you to the bed.”

He laughs dryly. “Knew I was in trouble when all them folks started showing-up.”

“Planes, too,” I say.

He doesn’t respond. I can see all the questions he wants to ask me gathering-up behind his eyes.

“You don’t remember the planes?” I ask, immediately regretting it. What’s wrong with you, I ask myself. Let it be. The less he remembers, the better. Leave it alone. Why can’t you just leave things alone, you idiot?

“I was outta my head with fever,” he says. “I reckon I dreamed a mess of things that never happened, yeah?”

“Dreams are just your imagination,” I say. “Memories last forever.”

“I reckon that’s the problem. I can’t tell the difference between my memories and my dreams. I don’t know where one stops and one begins. Everything’s all jumbled up. I’m not sure what happened and what didn’t. Maybe you can help me with that.” He reaches for his flute and drains his champagne in one long draft.

My pulse pounds my throat dry. He knows. He knows we fucked. He knows he climbed behind me and fucked himself out on me. I knew the day of reckoning would come but I didn’t think it’d come so soon. Well, it’s come for me. I think about what it means and I feel no shame. So what. Why should I feel ashamed? I love him completely. Do I tell him I’m in love with him? That I’ve always loved him? That sex with him felt like a beautiful wonderful thing because I’ve always loved him? I’ve never told anyone in my life I loved them. What’d be the point? I think about
telling him I love him and I realize I can’t do this. I can’t say that word. I can’t talk about love. Not with him. Whatever happens, happens. Here we go.
“I wanna talk straight with you,” Joel says. “I wanna straighten things between us.” He tugs at his short beard as he cues-up what he wants to say. This moment lasts an eternity, wondering what he's going to say and how he's going to say it. “Back in Jackson,” he says, "back with my brother. Did he ever…hurt you?”

A sense of relief mixes with anger. So that’s what he wants to know? He wants to know about me and Tommy. To know if we fucked. He has to ask me in his coded Joel language because he’s too chaste to use that word—fucked. Well, he’s got no right asking me that. He doesn’t really care about how I feel. If he did, he would’ve asked me these things before he went and killed Tommy. He just wants to be reassured he didn’t kill him in cold blood. In fact, if he had to choose, he’d probably prefer his brother fucking me over some stranger. At least he knows where Tommy’s been.

I won’t give him the satisfaction of an answer. It’s my own business who or what’s fucked itself between my legs. He keeps so many secrets from me and I’m so open with him. I'm entitled to have my own. I set my jaw and shrug, affecting indifference. “You’re the one who says we shouldn’t dwell on the past,” I say.

“Don’t quote me,” he says. “I hate being quoted. Now I asked you a question and you haven’t answered me so I’mma ask you again. Did he ever hurt you?”

I don’t respond.

“Are you gonna answer me or not?” he asks.

“Answer it yourself.”

“Stop!” he yells. His nose wings into a snarl, and his neck bloats and strangles in wrath. He slams his fist over his dinner plate, smashing it to pieces. Silverware and shards clatter loudly to the floor. He jabs a finger defiantly at me, bright blood snaking his arm and dripping his elbow. “Don’t you ever come out with no damned disrespect, do you hear me, child?” His voice is too loud and his manner’s too swaggering. I suppose it’s the champagne. I suppose it's gone to his head and he’s drunk.

I feel like I’m suffocating, being in the same room as him. Like I can’t breathe. I need fresh air. I need some distance from him to think about everything that just happened. Go sleep in the gazebo, I tell myself. The turn of the night will make things feel different when you get up tomorrow. You can talk to him tomorrow with a cooled head. I just need to get away from him and the house for a couple hours, to clear my head. I answer a wild call to flee, determined to get away from him and the house. I start heading toward the foyer.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he yells, stalking after me.

“What do you care?” I yell.

“That’s nonsense and you know it!”
I stop in the living room and face him square. “I’m leaving!”

“Well, you ain’t going nowhere till you answer my question!”

Answer his question? Answer his question! He needs to answer mine first. All his little secrets and evasions. Where do I even start? What really happened in Salt Lake City? At Jackson, why’d he leave me behind? Why’d he kill his own brother? Couldn’t he have settled things differently? I know I killed in cold blood, too. I know this. But it wasn’t the same thing. Eve and I had no history together. We weren’t kin. I could never kill my own kin. My own flesh and blood. He killed his own brother like you’d kill an animal. What kind of man was born to kill his own brother like that? No man in this world. “Where’s your brother, Joel?” I yell.

He doesn’t like this one bit. A marked change comes over his face. His mouth sets into a cruel smile and his eyes narrow with a savage cold light. He looks at me with bitter scorn and contempt. My hands go cold and a chill washes over my whole body. I could die from the way he’s looking at me. I could just curl up and die. “You’ve got as much blood on your hands as mine!” he yells, meaning Eve.

“She’s not my fucking kin!”

“Bastard child’s got no kin,” he says, his voice savage and protracted.

I cry-out in anguish. God! He can never take that back. Never. I cover my mouth with my hand and sob sloppy wet tears.

“Stop blubbering over me!” he yells, his face livid, grotesque, and contorted in rage. “I ain’t your father, you foolish child! That’s some other man’s misfortune! Don’t you ever say that word about me, ever!”

My blood chills and my whole body turns to ice. My heart knifes with his rejection. The blade turns over and over. He hates me. He hates me and he’s probably hated me since the first day he met me. He tried to offload me to his brother. He tried to offload me in Jackson to whoever would take me. My eyes are finally wide open. I can see it clear as day. He’ll keep trying to offload me till he can finally be rid of me. It’s all a game to him. Asking me to go live with him was just a cruel game. He’s stringing me along. He just wants a warm body and he doesn’t care if it’s me or someone else. He wants a housekeeper. Someone to haul his firewood and field dress his kill.

A chilling realization washes over me. If I have no father or surrogate, I mustn’t even exist. Unloved, invisible, and infinitesimal. Now that he’s absolved himself as my guardian, I’m free to go. I’ll get out of his sight, knowing how much I disgust him, knowing how much he hates me. All those years he had to carry my weight, resenting me. Now he can finally be free of me. I can’t get out of his sight quick enough.

I pull to my feet and swerve toward the foyer, my vision blurred with tears. I strike out in anger one last time. “She was soft!” I yell, meaning Eve. “She was born for dumb soft easy things!”

“Don’t you drag her name into such dirty affairs!” he yells.

“She wouldn’t have made it anyway!”

“That doesn’t give you the right!”

“Fuck you and fuck your right!”
“The right of a man who’s dedicated his life to saving yours! The right of a man who’s protected
you, who’s kept you alive!”

“I never left you alone to fight! To starve! To die of your wounds!” Angry hot tears spill my
cheeks. “You used me! You threw me away! You left me behind! Why?”

His mouth curls into a grim mocking smile. “So that’s what you wanna know, yeah? Well, you’ll
know soon enough. One day I’ll put you wise to why I done it but right now I’m keeping my
mouth shut.”

“You’re not man enough to tell me to my face!”

“Ellie, you and me are gonna have it out one of these days and bust it wide open but first you’re
gonna play square with me—”
Chapter Twenty

Boom! The steel shutters at the front of the house clatter violently. My blood ices. What’s this? What the hell’s this? Boom! The front door crashes into the foyer and slams over the tiles. I raise my arms to protect myself from the rocketing debris. Swarming flashlights arc through the billowing dust. Thundering footfalls rush into the house.

“Down!” a booming baritone voice yells. “Get down!”

I feel something like a rifle stock slam into the back of my thighs, propelling me to the floor. Rough strong hands lock my arms high and tight across my back. These hands are strong and firm, and they mean business. I lay still, pinned to the floor on my stomach.

Joel thrashes wildly at my side, pinned to the floor below two outlanders. One's tall and rangy, and the other's squat and thick. He wrenches back an arm and tosses the taller one backward. The squat one shoves the barrel of his submachine gun between Joel’s ass cheeks. “This won’t feel mighty good when I pull the trigger,” he says. “You hear me, boy?”

Joel makes a strangled grunt and lays his palms flat against the floor. A rifle muzzle clips the small of my back and pins down my hips. A large firm hand gropes me, searching for concealed weapons. It’s not pleasant to feel violated by the hands of someone you fear.

“She’s clean,” the baritone voice says behind my back.

The squat thick outlander stands over Joel with his submachine gun barrel shoved between his ass cheeks. “Dick-rider, too,” he says.

I’m hauled onto my knees and a muzzle jabs me between my shoulders. “Hands open, behind your head,” the baritone voice says. “Don’t move.”

“I’m not armed,” I say.

“Shut your filthy mouth or I’ll shut it for you,” the voice says. “Don’t move unless I tell you to move. Don’t talk unless I tell you to talk.”

Joel’s wrestled onto his knees and hauled to my side. The outlanders gather in front of us. Three of them. They’ve got expensive assault rifles, and wear worn-in surplus and moto gear. Rough beards cover their burnt-out faces streaked in grimy sweat. The two men who handled Joel are defective military. You can tell by the way they hold themselves straight and erect. The man who restrained me is the obvious leader. You can tell by his demeanor, his superior firearms, and the hang of his clothes—dark denim and leather moto.

“Murdock,” the leader says to the squat thick outlander. “The girl’s chit.”

Chit? What the hell’s a chit, is what I’m thinking. How the hell do I have a chit and not know about it? Murdock pulls a soiled crumpled piece of paper from his assault plate carrier worn over a nylon flight jacket. He’s muscular and stocky with a thick neck, small mean eyes, a sunburnt face, and a bald head. He wears a streaming mustache over a short dark-blond beard, and has a small snub nose that’s been broken a couple times over. “Here, Skane,” he says and hands the piece of
paper to Skane.

Skane looks at it and studies me with steely eyes. Chit. Me. Chit. Me.

“That’s the little cunt,” Murdock says.

“What’s your name, kid?” Skane asks me.

“Don’t you answer him,” Joel says to me, his voice deep from his chest.

“Shut your bitch-ass up,” Murdock says to him and jostles his long-barreled assault rifle in warning.

Skane squares in front of Joel. He addresses the other outlander. He calls him, "Greer." Greer’s got a thin face and long bitter lines running from his nose to his mouth. His thick curly hair’s the same color as mine. He’s got intelligent blue eyes and a long straight nose. “The Smuggler’s chit,” Skane says to him. Greer pulls out the same sort of tattered folded handbill from the pocket of his khaki military-style flight suit and hands it to Skane.

Skane looks at the chit and looks at Joel. Chit. Joel. Chit. Joel. “That’s a match, gentlemen,” he says. Greer whoops defiantly and Murdock twirls the streaming ends of his mustache. Skane takes my arm and pulls me from my knees to my feet. “Get him up,” he says to the men, meaning Joel. They take Joel by the arms and pull him from his knees to his feet. Joel and I stand side-by-side, waiting for what comes next. We don’t have to wait long. “Take off your clothes,” Skane says to us. “Both of you.”

I draw my arms across my chest and glance at Joel. His eyes glimmer black malice. Without warning, he lunges for Skane, intent on grabbing him. Skane leaps away, agile and swift, before Joel can reach him. Greer slams his stock into Joel’s chest, propelling him backward into the wall. Skane levels his shotgun at Joel. He backstrokes the barrel and chambers a shell. “Settle down,” he says to Joel, his voice stern. “It’s just procedure. Take off your clothes. Do as you’re told.” His manner’s calm and measured. You can tell he’s lethal and dangerous with a gun by his slow easy unrushed cautious manner. He’s sure of himself and his authority. He’s not a man to be fucked with.

Joel must realize this, too, because he rips his sweatshirt from his shoulders, kicks off his shoes, and tears down his jeans. He stands in his boxers, his chest rangy and his body wasted by fevers.

“The watch, asshole,” Murdock says and redraws his submachine gun.

Joel cups his watch protectively. He’ll never surrender it willingly. This is a fact.

“Take it off or we’ll cut-off your dick-skinners and do it for you,” Murdock says.

Joel doesn’t respond.

“Are you fucking deaf?” Murdock asks and takes a big step toward him. Joel grabs his wrist, strikes a forceful blow into his locked elbow, and drives him backward into the wall with a one-arm takedown. The steel window shutters clatter raucously. Murdock totters against the wall, his submachine gun clanging to the floor. In one deft move, Joel swipes Murdock’s gun from the floor and grabs me by the collar with his other hand. He draws me back into his chest and lodges the muzzle beneath my chin.

I almost shit my pants at this. He’s taken me hostage. He’d rather kill me than let these men have
me. None of this makes sense. These men aren’t worthy of my life nor his. Greer targets us down the long barrel of his assault rifle. Joel slowly treads backward toward the front door. I suppose he wants to try to make a run for it. This is absurd. Even if we could escape, we’re barefoot. We can’t get far without our shoes. He knows this. It must be a bluff.

“Stay back!” Joel yells, his voice throttled in vital threat. “Stay back or I’ll kill her!”

I almost shit my pants again when he says this. Skane laughs sardonically and tracks us down his shotgun barrel, his chin nestled against the stock. What’s this laugh? Why should anyone laugh at a time like this? My blood chills. A man with the upper hand would laugh, I realize.

“A hunted man’s in no position to set down his own terms,” Skane says. “There’s a big price on her little head and a little price on your big head. You signed your own death warrant that day at St. Mary’s. Hers, too. Don’t tempt your fate.”

I flinch like I’ve been punched in the stomach. The air leaves the room. I gasp, and I gasp again, trying to catch my breath. Deep in my gut, I always had a lurking suspicion something went awry in Salt Lake City but I didn’t have enough sense to figure it out. Now I know. Joel did something bad. Something very, very bad. He did this bad thing without my consent. What’d he do? Joel, what the fuck did you do, I ask him silently.

“Drop your weapon and hand over the girl,” Skane says. “Don’t make this anymore unpleasant than it already is.”

“Ellie, listen to me good,” Joel whispers into my ear. He slowly treads us toward the door. “When I tell you to run, you run like Hell’s coming after you.”

“Ellie,” Skane says, “step aside. I mean to kill that man behind you.”

“Shoot him up some!” Murdock yells at Skane. “Merc his ass up!”

“Pop-off both them bitches!” Greer yells.

“I want her and I mean to have her,” Skane says to Joel. “One life won’t stop me, nor a dozen. I’ve killed all the others who’ve stood in the way. I’m taking you dead or alive, whichever way you want it. The bounty’s paid, either way. Take a chance, or stand and take it.”

Joel thinks about this for a second. “Come and get me,” he says.

“Have it your way,” Skane says and takes a defiant step toward us.

“Run!” Joel yells and hurls me through the front door. I stumble onto the cold patio and stagger to a halt, overwhelmed by a great fog of betrayal and anger. I look back at the doorway. Joel’s planted himself in it, holding-off Greer, Murdock, and Skane from coming after me.

I look at him and it’s like I’m looking at him down the wrong end of a telescope. He’s never looked so small or alien to me in my life. I feel like I don’t even know who that man is. He looks like a stranger standing there. He robbed me of my free will. He mocked my blind devotion. He took away my choice. If he cared about me, he would’ve given me a choice. The only thing that matters in this world to him is himself. Bitter disappointment gives way to rage. A suffocating fury chokes me out. This feeling goes beyond words. This feeling needs action. With a cry of anguish, I barrel toward him and tear at him. “You lied to me! You fucking liar! You fucking lied!”

He deflects my blows, his whole face sagged in defeat. Footsteps thunder at his back. Murdock and Greer tear him away, drag him to the floor, and beat him, slamming their boots into his abdomen.
He curls onto his side and heaves wild breath through slavering lips, his arms shielding his head.

Skane grabs me and restrains me. “What’d we just brew up?” he laughs bitterly. I suppose he’s as confused as I am.

Betrayal cuts deep. Deception and lies. I never knew I was capable of such savage visceral quivering rage. I hate Joel as I’ve never hated him before. I shudder to even look at him. I care little if I ever see him alive again. “Liar!” I yell at him, my voice wild and splintered in wrath. “You fucking lied!”

“Shut that bitch up!” Murdock yells at Skane.

Chain-link handcuffs snap my wrists. Murdock steps away from beating Joel for a moment to address Skane. It must be important. “I wouldn’t trust that little cunt if I were you, Skane,” he says. "Don’t let her put your dick in her mouth. I’ve been bitten by bitches before. You’ll end up dickless with one ball. Don’t give her the chance to set her teeth on you!”

Skane laughs good-naturedly. “Easy on the Smuggler. There’s a bounty on that man.”
Chapter Twenty-One

It’s been a couple hours. Or maybe it’s been one hour. I’m not a reliable witness, locked in the woman’s closet with no windows or light. The passage of time’s marked by muffled men’s voices rising and falling through the floor. Objects banging and slamming from the rooms below.

I sit on the floor with my knees drawn to my chest and my numbed arms handcuffed above my head to a hanger rod. No escape. I already tried and it’s futile.

Footsteps echo from the stairs. They reach the landing and head this way. A while back, I heard the same ones. In my head, I pictured Skane by the nature of the movements. Neat, economic, and lightweight. No fumbling or rushing. Whoever it was went into the bathroom and stayed a while. I figured they were bathing. I don’t care one way or another about this. All of those men were in need of a good bath and a shave.

The door sill floods with burnished candlelight. The lock clicks, the handle turns, and the door opens to Skane. He enters holding a radiant round silver tray with a large pillar candle casting his fine cheekbones and narrow chin. His face’s freshly shaved and scrubbed clean. I was right. It was him who was in the bathroom before.

He sets the tray and his load-out on the large center island. It's nice to have a little bit of light again, I think to myself. He browses the closet and rummages the shelves. He takes his time doing this. He’s enjoying himself. What kind of man enjoys browsing a woman’s closet? Not any kind of man I know. He stuffs a couple pairs of leather gloves into his jacket pocket. He helps himself to a couple printed silk scarves. He stands in front of me and looks me over. “If I let you speak, promise to do as you’re told?” he asks.

I’ll do as I’m told, I tell him silently. I can’t speak with the gag in my mouth. I drop my chin to my chest, exposing the knot in a sign of assent, hoping he understands. He does. He tugs it loose and flings it to the floor. Jaw trembling, I draw deep breaths. I wipe my wet chin across my deadened arms. This is a very unpleasant feeling, my arms cold, useless, and numbed.

He lowers himself to the floor and sits across from me, putting the silver tray between us. It’s set with crystal old-fashioned glasses, a liquor bottle, a water bottle, and small bowls of almonds and olives. My mouth waters at the briny savory perfume but I’m not hungry. He rests his back against the center island, tents a knee to his chest, and splays his other leg toward me, long and lean. I smell sweet rich delicate soap coming off of his skin. Freshly bathed. He smells like a woman. He looks and acts like no man I’ve ever met. I think it’s because he’s a gentleman. I’ve never met one before but this is how I always imagined them to be like.

He takes the liquor bottle in his hand. He flays the capsule from the neck and splashes amber-colored alcohol into the glasses. Scotch. The bottle says Scotch. He lifts one and clinks it against the other. “Skål.” He takes a sip and rolls the alcohol around his mouth. He raises the other tumbler toward me in a gesture to drink.

I shake my head, no.

“Lovely stuff,” he says. “Infinite depth. Dry oak, bitter chocolate, and a faint touch of peat.”
I don’t respond.

“Drink,” he says, his voice stern. “It’s just for us. I can’t remember the last time I haven’t had to share one bottle with a hundred men.”

I relent. What’s the use of being difficult? He holds the glass to my mouth and tips it back with a graceful hand. I swallow and cough riotously, my eyes watering. So this must be Scotch.

He glances around the closet. His face is lean. His eyes are cold, alert, clear, and luminous in candeleight. He’s got the same wild reckless remorseless manner as Tommy. Someone who’d laugh in the face of death.

“Like Paradise to a fallen angel,” he says. “You’ve found a place no one dreamed still existed. Leisure class, old money. Everything with a touch of refinement and understated elegance. In my time, plenty were wealthy but few had good taste. Grey market millionaires, blue chip billionaires, nouveau riche oligarchs. Vulgarians who shamelessly brought-out the heavy artillery before lunchtime. That main house?” He gestures in the direction of the estate. “Treasures beyond tally. I haven’t even seen a clean piece of paper in years, not a single sheet to spare. But that hardly matters. What good’s a tapestry when all you need is a warm coat and a good pair of boots? Hand-embroidered linen for a bed you’ll never sleep in? Sports cars for roads washed out by untamed seas?

“When money no longer held value, the rich were poorer than the poor. They didn’t know how to grind flour, plant potatoes, slaughter hogs, or chart stars. Everything had been arranged from birth by a gentleman’s gentleman. They couldn’t even wash their own spare change or iron their own shoelaces if they wanted to.

“I had all of this at the height of my career, the youngest in my industry. Real royal stock. The immortal gifts of kings. Not like those men of God’s grace who bought their way in through industry and commerce. Illegitimate bastard children and mercenary marriages. I didn’t handle money, keys, or set foot in a kitchen till I was eighteen. I had an Italian cook, a Swiss accountant, an American lawyer, and a German secretary. I collected properties, yachts, race horses, sports cars, and beautiful women.” He rakes his hair from his temples and pours himself another drink. “I had a great passion for trophy hunting and indulged in it often but I wouldn’t trade all those exotic trophies for an American red fox.

“I spent a couple Christmases riding to hounds, chasing them up in Virginia. I knew a great American gentleman descended from a famous Civil War colonel who hosted sportsmen like me on his old plantation set on rolling hills bordered by open fields and pastures, most of it rideable. I arrived to a damp drifting mist. Inside, the fire blazed away. The feast was set for a hundred. Roasted turkey with chestnut stuffing and cider. In the foyer, there was an enormous Christmas tree lit with golden orbs and candles.

“We set out at dawn in a grand cavalcade—fifty horsemen riding hard on Thoroughbreds, tracking twenty-odd Foxhounds descended from grand dukes’ royal kennels, noses to the ground and their tails whipping, the young ones yelping and howling ahead of the old veterans holding the path. They’d been starved that morning—hungry hounds hunt the best.

“They gave chase with a full cry—the fox was up! He was the reddest fox I’d ever seen. His tail was almost as big as his body, tipped pure white. We trailed the hounds through swamps and forests until they lost his scent in a burnt field. They scattered and stirred him up, laying low, curled in a ball in a bed of ashes. Cunning resourceful little fox. He’ll do anything to evade capture and mislead his enemies. He doubles his tracks and feigns death even under torture. He knows every man’s hand is against him. He’ll keep to wherever he knows the rider’ll suffer the most—
swamps and knee-high brier tangles.

“Men started falling out of the race unable to keep up, horses exhausted, fifty down to a handful. A red streak flew past and the hounds headed him off through a field, straight toward the river. He dove-in and they splashed-in after him, the whole knot drifting downstream. He clawed up an embankment and dashed across a field, hounds snapping at his heels. Heavy with water and exhausted, he understood his fate. He turned around and faced them silently. They pounced and ripped him apart, tumbling till nothing was left, not even his tail.” He smiles wistfully. “Nothing quite like the beautiful delirium of chasing one down to stir the blood. Nerves strung to an exhilarating pitch, a chorus of pursuing hounds, and the clear chimes of the horn.”

“All that fuss for one red fox?” I ask.

“A worthy cunning adversary’s a rare infinite joy.” He smiles faintly and presses his glass against my mouth. He wants me to take a drink. “To hares, hounds, horses, and the thrill of the hunt!”

I don’t move nor speak.

“Drink,” he says. “It’s a night of celebration. Could be the last for who knows how long.”

Celebration? What’s he talking about, a night of celebration? This is one of the worst nights of my life. "What celebration?"

“If you follow a beast’s trail long enough, you’ll always come to the beast. We’ve been trailing you for a long time. And with that bounty, we’re not the only ones. Every living creature who can drag itself forward is out to get you. Men who kill for hire. We trailed you to that plant in Wyoming but only a fool would’ve ambushed so we waited till the oxbow and the grove that day of clear blue skies. You took out a dozen of my best men but we needed to take you alive, so we retreated.”

I gasp. We thought it was a Cresskill ambush. No, we were sure of it. It was Skane and his men. He was there, watching us. He and his men almost killed Joel that day.

“Then the rains came,” he says. “We thought all was lost, figured no one made it out alive. We’d all but given up but that Smuggler’s a tough son of a bitch, a real fighting bastard.” He takes a sip of Scotch. “He’ll get everything coming to him. A man who did what he did is aware of the fate that awaits him once he’s captured. Penalties and repercussions made certain by the customs and codes that govern them. Volatile men need to be held accountable and punished for their actions.”

He twists a set of phantom cufflinks at his wrist. “He doesn’t disappoint, worthy of his reputation. He acted just like the type of man who did all the things they said he did. A wild black-bearded desperado. The world as his enemy. Blood calling for blood. Many lesser men broke the trail, wouldn’t dare face him. It’s been a long game but it’s a game nature loves and it’s played till the end. I would’ve gone halfway to Hell for twice as much.”

He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out the crumpled chit. “You probably wanna know what’s on this paper. Of course you do.”

He holds it in front of my face and lets me read it. It’s handwritten in authoritative letters, written on a slant, on a precious piece of paper. My heart beats fast. As I read it, I have to stop and look away often. I’ve never seen my name in print and it’s a very strange feeling. No date, no author, no entity. Just details. Names, places, and deaths. Many deaths. All that slaughter at the hands of one man. At the hands of Joel. I don’t pretend to understand it all. It happened while I was there but I have no recollection, like a bad dream. My breath comes hard and fast as I read.
Escaped from St. Mary’s Hospital, Salt Lake City, Utah Territory, on the night of April 28, 20 and 34 in a black pick-up truck that didn’t belong to him. The Smuggler. Known as Joel Miller, convicted of the multiple manslaughter of 57 Fireflies. Escaped and abetted the kidnapping of Ellie Williams, who will be recognized by hazel eyes, auburn hair, approximately 5’4” tall, and a slight build of 110 lbs. Fifteen-years-old at the incident of kidnap. Williams aided and abetted multiple counts of manslaughter.

The Smuggler will be recognized by brown eyes, a black beard, black hair, approximately 5’11” tall, and a muscular build of 220 lbs. Fifty-years-old at the incident of manslaughter. He has a record as a kidnapper, murderer, outlaw, and desperado, and his trade is a bounty hunter. He’s low-bred but speaks well. Former residences include Travis County, Texas Territory and Boston QZ, Massachusetts Territory.

A hefty reward of firearms, munitions of war, and assorted light weaponry will be paid for delivery of his body, dead or alive, to the Firefly HQ in Salt Lake City, Utah, at St. Mary’s Hospital. No chances should be taken. He shoots on sight and has a reckless disregard for human life. He should be considered armed and extremely dangerous. Anyone who harbors Joel Miller or Ellie Williams, or doesn’t disclose their whereabouts is held in contempt of court.

I gasp through choking anger and resentment. I want to set fire to this paper and burn it out of existence, is what I want to do. Joel made me his unwitting accomplice. An accessory to his crimes. He acted irresponsibly beyond reason. Knowing I’m a wanted outlaw, a sense of exhaustion and loneliness floods over me. I have the acute understanding everyone’s against me. I’ll be on the wrong end of a manhunt till they catch me and kill me. I’m a guilty outlaw. Me. A sixteen-year-old girl. Until I surrender myself to the Fireflies or someone captures me and turns me over, I’ll be hunted until the end of my life. Captured and killed.

“So you’re a hired gun,” I say. “Are you gonna kill me?”

“Enjoyment lies in the hunt, not in the kill.”

“Are you gonna kill him?” I ask, meaning Joel.

“There’s little satisfaction in killing you now that I’ve got you.”

“Who hired you?”

“It’s not my right to say.”

“Tell me the truth. Don’t lie to me. Is Marlene dead?”

He tilts his head inquisitively. “I expected you to know without asking.”

It’s futile to explain the whole story to him. What’s the point? He wouldn’t believe me anyway. It’s everyone’s word against mine, written on a handbill.

“Murder will out,” he says. He cocks his fingers into a pistol and aims jocundly at my skull.

“Headshot. Alea iacta est. He cast the die.”

I exhale brightly. God have mercy on Marlene. The loss of her cuts deep. I knew her. She was good to me. She watched over me in Boston. My immunity was supposed to be the savior of mankind not a massacre at Joel’s selfish hands. “He told me they stopped looking for a cure,” I say, my voice thin in disbelief. “He told me they turned us away.”

“He told you wrong,” he says, plaintively. “The thief of the world. You’re the chosen of the
chosen. Dying to save. Blessed with the power to bring light from darkness, and day from night. No more curses or candles.” He rolls his glass around his fingers. “The thought of them cracking your skull open like a walnut must’ve made him change his mind. The cure’s trapped in that sweet little brain of yours.”

My eyes fill with tears. It’s all clear now. My life for a cure. Dying to save. So what? If it’s the only way, I’ll take it voluntarily. Why couldn’t Joel just let fate take its course? It wasn't his decision to take. I’m chilled by his selfishness and irresponsibility. He knew the Fireflies and their hired guns were coming to find us. Of course they were coming. Anyone with any common sense would know they'd come for retribution. He knew they’d strike Jackson and knew they’d do it when it was least expected. He deliberately ignored the threat of danger. His selfish actions endangered every innocent life at Jackson under the certainty that mercenaries would strike-out in revenge. He wittingly drew me, Tommy, and Maria into his crimes.

“How easily man can destroy the trust of another,” he says, “and in an entire lifetime it can never be repaired. He’ll put up a fight when he sees his power fading—small precious things cast aside, little cords snapping and falling away. He’ll hold-on tight to whatever he can, exactly what any man would do with a child he’s grown to love. But like any man with a treasure, he grows careless over time.”

I understand in every person’s life, there comes a time when you must choose to die. If you’re lucky enough to have the choice, you get to choose. Live or die. I choose. It’s not a hard decision. It comes to me right away with firm resolve. My life for a cure. I look at Skane directly. “Take me to the Fireflies. I surrender.”

He laughs sardonically. “Soon. Soon enough.”

What’s this? Do I have to beg him to take me to the Fireflies? Beg to be killed? Haven’t they been searching for me and a cure long enough?

He dips into the bowl of almonds and offers me one.

“I come bearing gold, frankincense, and myrrh. You’d be wise to take it. You’ll need your strength for where you’re going.”

What a strange thing to say. “Aren’t you taking me to the Fireflies?” I ask. “To Salt Lake City? To Saint Mary’s?”

“That’s not my job. I’m just the wrangler.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“I can’t tell you that.” He glances around the closet with its orderly shelves. Silk scarves, cashmere knitwear, and leather purses accented in lavish gold trim. “I’m not gonna lie. It’s gonna be rough. Nothing like this. Makes this place look like a sultan’s seaside harem for his two thousand wives. A sheikh among Bedouins. It’s a mean tiresome grimy business.”

He pulls to his feet. He removes his pistol from his hip-slung holster and digs into the bottom of it. He pulls something out and jostles it in his hand. A pair of ivory dice, burnished in age. “I haven’t played these since the march of progress ground to a halt. I’d say tonight merits.”

“Tonight merits what?” I ask, my blood icing.
“Call it.”

“Call what?”

“Odd or even.”

“What are we calling?”

“The spoils of war. The winner gets shaved and fucked by the loser.”

I laugh sharply. Nervous laughter. My laughter dies with the realization his face’s already clean-shaven. I gasp. Shave a man’s bush! What kind of woman was put on this earth to do that? Shave away the big sweaty musky mop from a man’s balls? Not me, that’s who. “I’m not calling anything!” I yell.

“Destiny shapes our beginnings and ends. What happens in the middle’s up to you.”

“To do those kinda things to a stranger because a dice came down one way or another?” I yell.

“It’s the only way to settle these things diplomatically.”

“That’s not my kinda gamble. Call it yourself.”

He jostles the dice in his cupped palm. “Even,” he says and tosses them across the floor, his lips parting soundlessly as they land with a sinister clatter. Five and two. Lucky seven. I won. I don’t know what it means for him, but I won.
Chapter Twenty-Two

Candlelight bathes the master bathroom walls yellow, cast from a dozen hurricane lanterns spaced evenly along the marble floor. Skane must’ve lit them when he came up earlier to bathe.

I sit between the sinks on the long marble counter top of the double-sink console, backed against the mirror. I wear nothing but a bathrobe, a couple sizes too big. Skane made me change into it. I resisted at first. He pulled Joel’s revolver from strong side carry and said he had six good reasons why I should listen to him. So I did.

He stands in front of me arranging the counter top with beauty products pulled from the drawers. He pumps clear oil into his hand from a tall glass bottle, rubs it around his palms, and applies it to the ends of his thick grey hair, studying himself in the mirror. A sweet delicate almond scent fills the room. He sighs deep, full of nostalgia and longing.

“That smell takes me back,” he says. “One of the few superlatives left in this world. I rarely did it myself. There was always someone to do it for me and when the occasion merited, I flew-in my *maestro barbiere* from Milan. Manners make the man. In my day, girls your age were sent to finishing schools high in the Swiss mountains to learn the noblesse oblige graces.” He addresses me. “Know how to peel and eat an orange with cutlery?”

I’ve never even seen a real orange in my life. “That’d ruin the whole point of eating,” I say.

He laughs freely like I’ve made a joke. “I suppose you would’ve been one of those rebellious girls to ditch the semester to ski the glaciers from a fireside canton suite.” He pumps another dollop into his hand and massages it into his hair. “Every social grace carried strict rules, as strict as the codes of the Samurai. At dinner parties, everything on the menu was coordinated with the color and pattern of the serveware, the dinnerware, the flatware, the glassware, the flowers, and the table linens. Even the hostess’ dress. A badly-composed menu and an unrefined table was the quickest way to turn a dinner party into a disaster.”

What a strange man, talking about etiquette and civil things like they still exist. He’s either a lunatic or a tourist who never found his way back home. I suppose I should feel sorry for him. “People should eat and act however they want,” I say.

“Guided by good manners,” he says. “The intent’s ease, setting a pleasant tone. Throwing a dinner party meant taking responsibility for the well-being of your guests. Showing you’ve made an effort and used good taste. Your intention’s to give everyone the same impression they’re the first person in the world you’re the happiest to see. A code of good behavior based on consideration—”

“Based on lies,” I say, interrupting him.

“Pleasant half-truths. Good manners often means concealing the truth with hypocrisy.”

“It’s bad manners to lie.”

“No one’s fooled. It saves face and preserves honor. Either you’re civilized with a lie or brutal with the truth. Better to turn down an invitation than to say to someone you don’t find them worthy of your time. When a friend asks your honest opinion of an unbecoming hairstyle or a vulgar
boyfriend, they’re looking for reassurance and approval, not criticism. Distortion’s practically
indispensable if you wish to live civilly.”

Live civilly? Where’s a man like him been holed-up for the past two decades? Writing books on
etiquette, I suppose. Gold spoke like he read a lot of books but Skane speaks like he wrote them.
“Why should anyone bother learning the rules of a world that doesn’t exist anymore?” I ask.

He scoffs. “The handshake? It was set-down centuries ago. The bare hand was extended to show a
weapon wasn’t being concealed.” He knifes the flat of his hand toward me, gesturing for a
handshake. “A pledge of good intent and good faith. An oath of friendship.”

I slide my hand tentatively into his. He squeezes it. His handshake’s warm, soft, and sincere. His
hands are strong and elegant, the fingers lean and tapered. I know how this is going to sound before
I say it but hear me out. I always dreamed of meeting a man like this. A strange man from a strange
place. He’s the most exotic stranger I’ve ever met. Everything he does interests me, even the way
he speaks, with distinct pronunciation and strange cadence just under his tongue. You can barely
hear it but it’s there. I hated the way everyone spoke in Massachusetts Territory and Jackson. They
sounded dumb or insincere. I find his accent fascinating. I find his whole manner fascinating. He’s
unlike any man I’ve ever met. I didn’t even know men like this existed in the world. He’s a tourist.
A foreigner. An exile.

“Now tell me,” he says. He takes his time telling me the second part of what he wants to tell me.
He runs his hands under my robe and touches my legs, running his fingers up my thighs. “How’d
you like to spend the rest of the short time you have left on this earth being shaved and fucked by
me?”

A cold fear seizes my heart and sweat breaks-out across my forehead. It hits me hard, this
understanding I’ll be dead soon. The minute I’m handed back to the Fireflies, I’m dead. These are
my last moments on earth. This is it. This is all I have left. These are the last memories I’ll have
before I’m dead and gone. I won’t be around for a world with a cure or to see if my sacrifice even
gets that far. I’m very confused about this. I suppose I’d need a long time to sort it all out but I’ll
die just as confused and scared as I am now. My eyes fill with tears. “I don’t know,” I say, my
voice thin. “I’ve never died before.”

He laughs mockingly. “Look at you! Like a child! All emotion and little thought.”

Fuck you, I yell at him silently. What kind of man laughs at a scared girl? What kind of man does
this? Not a gentleman, that’s for sure. I tent my legs to my chest and bury my head against my
knees, crying softly.

He continues grooming himself as if I’m not in the room. As if I’m not sitting here in front of him,
crying, panicking, and longing to be held and soothed by someone bigger, stronger, and calmer
than me. Don’t all men feel the need to comfort a woman in distress? His inattention makes me cry
harder, makes me feel ignored and insignificant, and makes me feel very alone. Like I’ve been put
into this room with this stranger and all that was familiar is long gone.

“I expect it’s difficult,” he says, his voice clement. “Competition risks failure and losing hurts.
You can’t always win. Your faith’s eroded. Your heart and pride have suffered a mortal blow.
Every woman past the age of eighteen knows how to get over heartbreak and betrayal but you’re
still a child. Every departure feels like the end of the world. A nice pretty girl falls in love with a
beautiful vital man who betrays her and deserts her. Crying alone, waiting for words and
explanations that’ll never come, wondering what happened, knowing you don’t really want an
answer as much as you do, so you start making-up excuses, futile attempts to explain what can
never be explained.
“Sometimes it happens gradually. He stops listening when you talk, watches someone younger and prettier across the room, stops complimenting your appearance, your clothes, the meals you make him, and the gifts you give him. He stops laughing at your dumb little jokes. Hugs instead of embraces. Pecks on the cheek instead of lingering kisses. No more talk of the future, not even the next day. Dates dwindle, then only double-dates with other couples. He can’t stand being alone with you. Contact tapers—he only does so out of duty, never just to chat or check-in. And no matter how hard you try to please him with new clothes, new lingerie, or a new hairstyle, nothing works.

“Every affection’s returned. No longer any reason to contact each other, you wait with blind hope, night after night, praying some small miracle or some big crisis will bring him back to you and rescue you from your heartache. Unable to accept the unacceptable, you start seeing him everywhere, his likeness in other men. The same walk, the same habits, the same smells. You hear his voice in the wind, his footsteps in an empty room, and his laughter in a crowd. Little reminders of him everywhere tug at your heart.”

I wipe my wet face with my sleeve. I’ve cried myself down to clarity. I suppose the pain I feel is from the loss of the man who was the only big voice in my world. I suppose I’m mourning the loss of Joel. My whole existence began with him. My needs were either answered by him or they weren’t answered at all. He knew what gave me life and what drove me from it. Through him, I learned who I was and what it took to survive but the world he showed me can no longer contain him. He’s not as reliable as I’d thought he was. I foolishly assumed everything would be alright and work itself out. I believed he was loyal, devoted, and true, just like me, just like I always treated him, and just like I believed I deserved. I found my God in him. God was him. And he was insufficient.

“Don’t despair,” he says. “Destiny awaits. Your legacy. To be reaped by the next generation of girls born into a world so uncomplicated, they’ll be free to suffer heartache as often as they like. To drink too much, dance too much, wear too little, laugh too loud, and find someone else to take away the pain as quickly as possible, someone who’ll take them to places where they can’t cry alone even if they wanted to. Forget him, even if feels impossible. His memory’ll fade and you’ll realize he was just an ordinary man, no different than anyone else. He’s about to go away, starting now. Everything’ll be like it was before him.” He runs his hands under my robe and feels-up my legs. “Promise you’ll behave yourself?”

“And if I don’t?” I ask.

“No more arguments.” He pulls my bathrobe apart, a little bit at a time, looking at my legs as he uncovers them. He stops when he reaches my twat, covered in short bristle. He spreads my legs apart until he can see everything between my thighs, shiny and pink. He looks at my twat as if he’s appraising a rare precious diamond, his face attentive and full of questions, like he’s about to ask me about its clarity, carat, cut, and color.

When it looks like he’s got the whole layout memorized, he pumps clear oil into his hands and whisks it around his palms. More oil than he used for his hair. A lot more. There’s an odd severity to him, I realize. A man searching for a holy grail. Something to make his life worthwhile. He’s not formal but he has high standards and he sticks to them.

He touches-up my thighs and works his oily fingers in small tight circles around my mound. The room fills with the smell of sweet rich almond perfume. So it begins. Why shouldn’t it? I want to know what it’s like to be fucked by a foreigner. Who wouldn’t? It’ll never happen again in my life. I want to know what it feels like, want answers to all of those questions I’ve been asking myself.
I grab his hand and hold it between my legs, rubbing my wet twat against his slicked-up fingers. I look at him directly. His eyes are glassed over. He takes my ankle in his hand and draws my foot over his hard cock through his jeans. He slowly fucks himself against my foot. He pinches my thigh and slips a finger into my split, smooth and slippery with oil. He slowly pushes it deeper and I watch myself stretch and close around his big knuckle. He slowly fucks me with his finger and fucks himself against my foot, watching our reflection in the mirror. Why he does this, I have no idea. I suppose it makes him feel like he’s watching a show so I give him a show. I reach a hand beneath my ass and slide one of my fingers in with his. At first he seems confused because he can’t decide if he wants to watch what’s happening in our reflection or what’s happening right below his nose.

His eyes finally settle on what’s happening right below his nose. I can tell by the look on his face it’s driving him wild, watching me stretch and close both of our fingers. The way our fingers disappear together inside my little hole. He looks like he’s going to shit his pants, hopping from one foot to the other, and making little impatient gasps. I’m so slippery from oil and sopping wet between my legs, our fingers start making those sloppy cunt-fucking noises.

I open my thighs wider and lift my belly closer to him. He stops finger-fucking me. He pulls my bathrobe viciously from my shoulders and takes everything in. My breasts, my belly, my twat. He takes everything in like a vampire. His staring eyes suck-in everything. He leans over me and pushes his face against my chest. He kisses my breasts, nipping and licking, working down to my belly. His face is very soft. I haven’t felt skin like this on a man since Boston. Skin like a woman’s. I start moving my body like I’m slowly fucking him because I want to be fucked. He licks and sucks my navel, and lays his soft face against my soft belly, like he’s settling down for a nice long nap. He holds onto me tight, pulling himself closer. “Oh, God,” he says, his voice breathless. “The way you move. I could watch you all night, just stop everything and watch you all night.”

How his cock’s still in his pants, I have no idea. He’s so worked-up that if he takes it out, I can’t imagine it’ll be very long before he comes. I suppose that’s what gentlemen do. Ladies first. The gentlemen wait their turn for the ladies to come first. Maybe that’s how they do it where he’s from. Just as I’m wondering where he’s from, his fingers go into his fly and his cock springs out. A cock like that is what I’d expect to see on a man who looks like him. It sits up high, thick, and hard, ready to give me a good fucking. He makes little gasps of pleasure and strokes himself in his greasy hand. His other hand pokes between my thighs and he pushes his finger back into my split. He arches his head downward, sticks his face between my thighs, and licks the wetness from them, one hand playing with his cock and the other playing with my twat. After he licks my thighs clean, he pops out his finger and rubs his face against everything between my legs.

He takes each of my ass cheeks in each of his hands and spreads me wider. From somewhere under my ass, I feel his tongue licking. Licking and sucking that little strip between my little holes. I can’t see his face but I can hear the sloppy dirty noises of his cunt-licking. He stuffs my twat with his mouth and starts sucking hard, like he wants to suck me dry. He sucks until he has a mouthful of my wetness mixed with his saliva and he spits the whole mouthful on my belly.

Look at this lunatic, I think to myself. You can tell he loves to fuck and be fucked, and he’s desperate about it. He licks the mess from my belly and fucks his tongue into my navel. He does this till I’m clean and moves back down to my thighs, licking and kissing and sucking my twat. He slowly fucks me with his finger while his other hand fucks his cock. Soon enough, I can tell he’s going to come, his hand working his cock like he’s trying to murder it.

He comes on my belly, spilling-out loads of come, warm and thick. I start to come, lifting my belly toward him and fucking myself against his finger. He wipes his cock around the whole mess as I fuck myself out against him. A man like him must be dying to feel my lips on his cock, I think to
myself. To feel the warmth and wetness of my mouth, dying to feed me his come off his fingers. I heard what Murdock said to him. I was there. No man wants to be left dickless with one ball.

He cleans me off with a towel and brings over the bottle of Scotch. I slip back into the bathrobe, covering myself from the waist-up. My nipples have turned dark purple and rock hard from the chill in the air. We pass the bottle of Scotch between us, drinking straight from the neck till he says it’s time for my shave.

He whips-up a cake of soap with a shaving brush into a thick creamy lather and paints everything between my legs with it, even my asshole. He lets it sit for a minute and polishes a tortoiseshell-handled straight razor on a strop of hide.

He spreads me wide open and stretches the skin around my twat smooth and taut. I pray he’s sober enough to do this. He’d better be. He must feel my apprehension because he tells me to relax and says he wields a razor like a matador’s sword. He skims the razor across the top of my mound, and strips the foam and bristle in smooth graceful strokes. He works unhurriedly, rinsing the blade after each swipe. As he works, he tells me a story.

“Once upon a time, long ago, there lived a brave Crusader and a beautiful princess. They were madly in love but her hand was promised to another in an arranged marriage. One day, the Crusader was called to take up the Cross, a ten year’s journey to recover the Empire. As he prepared to set sail, the princess promised to wait for him and they pledged eternal love to each other.”

He pauses and addresses me, saying, “You’re young, Ellie, about the same age as the princess. When you’re young, ten years seems like an eternity. When you’re thirty, ten years passes like a good night’s sleep. When you’re forty, you’re just happy you’ve lived to be forty, no matter how fast or slow the years pass.” He laughs. I like this laugh. I like this man. He’s full of fairy tales and fables in exotic lands. He uses big words with me. Words I’ve never heard before. I have no idea what half these big words mean but he believes I do and that’s all that matters. No man has ever treated me like an intellectual equal. All men should treat me like this, I think to myself.

He continues, “Ten long years passed. Days before his ship was spotted on the horizon, a false rumor reached the princess’ ears that he was killed in an honorable battle, cut down by cold steel entering his warm body. Overwhelmed with grief and paralyzed with despair, she killed herself. Shortly after, the Crusader returned victorious but there were no celebrations to be had. Devastated by the death of his true love, he set-out on a seven-years’ journey in deep reflection and meditation—never sleeping, never eating, never speaking, and never stopping—wandering the earth in solitude, his eyes heavy with tears, but being a brave Crusader, he was unable to cry.

“After a couple years, his eyelids grew so heavy and swollen with unshed tears, he thought he’d die, growing heavier and heavier with each step. Out of desperation, he plucked out an eyelash and it provoked a single tear. He plucked them out, one by one, till they were all gone, along with his tears. His lids were bare, his tears were shed, and all of his burdens were gone. His heart was atoned and his eyes were restored. He finished seven years’ meditation and solitude, and found great peace.”

He finishes the story as he finishes his work, everything between my legs shaved bare. He pumps a lightweight gel from a tall glass bottle and daubs it over my freshly-shaved tender skin until it’s absorbed. I’ve never felt myself so soft, smooth, clean, and hairless in my life.

“Skin’s soothed and mind’s at rest,” he says. He wipes his hands on a towel and leads me to the floor.
I’ve only known him for a short while but I’m overcome by a feeling of tenderness and attachment to him. It’s very easy to have these kinds of feelings for a man like him. He’s given me more care and attention in one hour than anyone has given me in my whole life. He’s mysterious, magnetic, and vital. Cultured, urbane, and well-travelled. He knows enchanting stories and strange words, and he’s shared them with me. I’m used to evasive cruel simple manipulative men who have selfish needs.

He pulls his jacket from the vanity chair. He puts it on and looks at me directly. His face has changed, drawn-in on itself. If he was capable of scowling, he’d scowl at me, but his face’s too refined for that kind of coarse expression. “Don’t look at me like that,” he says.

“Like what?” I ask, baffled.

“That look.”

“What look?” I try to make my face as blank as possible. I suppose he saw the warmth for him in my eyes. If he saw this look, so what? Why should it bother him? Why should he care what I think of him? I’ll never see him again after tonight.

He turns his attention to the vanity and rummages the top drawer. His manner’s acidic. “Don’t hold onto things or people. Only children talk about love and only fools fall in love. To give yourself completely over to someone else is humiliating. Surrender makes you a victim—vulnerable—open to assault and degradation. It’s better when someone’s in love with you. It leaves a hand free for torture.”
My whole body trembles, fraught with tension, every nerve awakened. Behind me, I hear the sounds of Skane undressing. Denim crumpling, rivets unfastening, and boots hitting the floor.

I’m bridged naked over the center of the bed in the master bedroom, waiting for him. I have the acute understanding he’s going to do very obscene things to me no man has ever done to me before. Why? Because it’s him and he’s a lunatic. He has no inhibitions. He acts sure of himself because he is. The men in Boston and Jackson were ill at ease around women. They knew so little about them and they stuck to themselves. Their jokes and behavior were crude and brash. They were confused by women because they were unsure of themselves.

I try to anticipate the obscene things Skane’s going to do to me. It won’t involve my mouth, that’s for sure. One of the silk scarves from the closet is bunched between my lips and tied snugly behind my head. Murdock’s warning, you know.

I hear his footsteps padding the sheared area rug in approach. The end-of-bed leather ottoman rasps beneath his weight and he climbs behind me. I draw-in my shoulders, anticipating his touch. It comes. His warm abdomen pushes against my ass. He presses himself against me and rubs himself all over my skin. I feel nothing but his bare naked warm skin against mine. Cock and balls, no bush. He shaved it off when he shaved-off his beard. A very close shave. There's no sensation of rough stubble when he rubs against me the wrong way.

He puts his hands on my thighs and feels them up, pinching and squeezing my legs. He kisses me square over the lips of my twat, slipping his tongue all over them. I make little sounds of pleasure and open my thighs wider. He sucks on the lips, drawing them into his mouth and pushing them out. Oh, what a sensation. His soft smooth lips and freshly-shaven face on my freshly-shaven skin. I don’t want him to stop, but he does.

I whimper and scissor my thighs, waiting for what comes next. I can’t hold myself still. With no bush to soak-up my wetness, I’m already completely soaked. I wait and I wait. I have the understanding he’s still behind me so I buck my hips backward. Smack! My ass slaps him square against his face. I wait for his reaction. He must like what I did because he holds me by the hips and digs his tongue deep into my split. I exhale brightly. He licks-up dripping mouthfuls, his nose pushing against my asshole. He spreads me apart with his fingers, holds me wide open, and shoves-in his tongue. Everything he does makes me so much hotter and wetter. He pushes his mouth deep inside me and fucks me with his tongue, twisting and turning. I make plenty of oohs and aahs as he licks, sucks, and kisses everything between my legs. He’s got me good.

He takes my ass cheeks in both hands and spreads them far apart. I know him well enough to know what he’s doing. Staring at my tight pink asshole, studying it like he studied my twat, appraising it like a rare diamond. There’s nothing else he could possibly be doing back there with my ass cheeks spread wide apart in his hands. I know I’m right because he asks, “Has any other man ever seen you like this? Has anyone ever taken you like this? Am I the first?”

He pushes my shoulders down to the mattress and I follow his lead, cradling my head in my folded arms. He hoists my ass higher and clings to the back of my thighs. He runs his tongue over my asshole. I coo softly. Squishy, warm, and soft. He licks it, kisses it, and sucks it. He starts running
the tip of his tongue up into it, darting and twisting it around. I ooh and ahh. I start leaking bucketfuls of wetness mixed with his slobber, halfway down to my knees. He digs his tongue halfway inside me and holds it still. It goes on a bit too long for my liking, so I bear down a bit and push it out. He likes this because he does it again and again, and I push out his tongue again and again. He runs a finger over my asshole and pokes at it. I wiggle gently against it, taking-in the new sensation. Something harder and firmer and bigger than his tongue.

He pushes his finger up my ass and I howl. No! Not that! I kick-out a leg and try to push him off. He puts one arm tightly around my waist and pushes his finger a bit deeper. I tell him to take it out, it hurts. I won’t be fucked in the ass! Not by his finger, not by his cock, not by anyone else’s cock! My words are useless, muffled into the gag. If he can understand, he makes no intention of hearing me. I try to get away from him, but every time I struggle, he uses it to his advantage and pushes his finger deeper inside me until there’s no more of his finger to push inside. Take it out, I yell into the gag. Go find someone else who likes it, I whine. Not me! He tells me to behave or he’ll put his whole arm up there to his elbow. I picture this in my head, and I go very quiet and very still.

He eases out his finger and I cry out in relief, panting into the gag. He tightens his arm around my waist and I feel the firm slippery head of his cock pressing against my asshole. He holds himself in his hand and tries to squeeze himself in. I howl and kick-out a leg. No, not that! Anything but that! You can fuck whatever you want into any other hole in my body. Please, not my ass. Please, not that!

He squeezes the head of his cock into my ass and slowly fucks himself in. I feel the head of his cock sliding up my ass, slow as a snail, and it feels unbearable. Stretching and burning in a place where I’m not meant to stretch around a cock. I wail, begging him to take it out. He tells me firmly he’s keeping his cock in my ass and he’s going to put the rest of it in there, and he works himself deeper. I wail and holler. I can’t stand the feeling of his dick in my ass. It feels like the worst thing in the world!

He hoists me up higher and sets his cock deeper. I feel his balls brush against my twat and I realize there’s no more of his cock to push inside me. His fingers poke between my legs and he starts playing with me. Soon the feeling inside my ass I couldn’t stand changes into something slipperier and warmer and wonderful. Wetness flows freely between my legs. I feel the heat coming off my twat like a furnace. He pushes his finger into my twat and I can’t hold any part of my body still or stop squealing. He starts to slowly fuck me with his cock and his finger, and I start coming on the first shove up my ass. I feel myself coming everywhere, all at the same time. I wail and wriggle all over the mattress as I come. Every time I wail, he stuffs his finger deeper. I feel like I’m never going to stop coming. I come longer and harder than I’ve ever come in my whole life, gasping and panting and slobbering all over myself.

Once the climax ends, the sensation of his cock inside my ass is unbearable again. He hasn’t come yet and he's still slowly fucking my ass. I beg him to come or take it out. Take it out and fuck my cunt! He tells me to take his fucking and take it good. I fight against him, trying to get away. He takes my arm and hammerlocks it behind my back, and continues to fuck my ass, dragging me around the bed. I howl, begging him to take himself out. He hoists me up higher and fucks himself deeper, using my arm for leverage.

Soon enough his cock feels wonderful again and I beg him to play with my cunt. He tells me to play with it myself and releases my arm. I reach a hand down between my legs. Hot, wet, and completely fucked apart. I poke-in a finger and it feels like I'm sticking my finger into a vat of boiling oil. I start to come almost as soon as my finger falls into my split. I wail and tell him I’m coming, I feel something new and strange. Hot cockfuls of come filling my ass. I howl. It’s the worst thing I can imagine in the world—the feeling of his hot thick come flooding my ass. I fight
against him and beg him to stop. The more I wail, the harder he fucks his come into me. I feel it squirting all through my ass and I stop protesting because it makes me come in a way I’ve never come before, like my whole body's boiling and turning itself inside-out. He comes and he comes, fucking me down into the bed till I’m laid flat on my belly. He’s never going to stop coming and neither am I.

When he does, he takes himself out very slowly and rolls off me. I lay down my head on my folded arm, reach my free hand beneath my belly, and play with myself. I could easily make myself come against my fingers, everything feels so good. I start making soft pleased sounds. I stop as I hear something strange. The dull heavy thud of weight tumbling onto the floor. In my mind, I picture the ottoman overturning but that doesn’t make any sense. I glance over my shoulder and look down the length of my body. I gasp at what I see—Skane’s passed-out on the floor. He lays unconscious, sprawled on his back with his legs splayed and his knees unlocked. Is he dead? Did he die? Did he fuck himself into a heart attack? A stroke? A seizure? Was it the Scotch? Was he poisoned? Oh, God, am I next?

It doesn’t matter. I know what I should do. Grab his load-out, slit his throat, and leave him for dead. Then tiptoe downstairs where Murdock and Greer are probably passed out drunk, and slit their throats, too. Then I’ll find Joel and slit his throat. Why shouldn’t I? I want to fucking kill him like you’d slaughter an animal. I want to feel his hot blood pour over the back of my hand as he bleeds-out all over me and begs for my forgiveness. A moment of reason returns to me. No, I tell myself. I’ve made my decision. This is what fate handed me and I’m going to play out my hand. What's left for me in this world? Nothing. There’s nothing left for me in this world.

I crouch at Skane’s side. I touch his face, and find his skin cold and clammy beneath my hand. His forehead’s covered in fat blobby sweat. “Get up, Skane,” I say, patting his face. “Get up. You can’t sleep. Get up!”

He gasps and opens his eyes, unfocused and clouded in confusion. He looks at me and looks at the ceiling. Me. Ceiling. Me. Ceiling. After an intense effort, I see the reason slowly returning to him. He struggles to rise, his head swiveling drunkenly and perspiration dripping the tip of his nose. He can’t manage. He’s too weak.

“Yes, hurt?” I ask.

“I never am,” he says with a thick slurred tongue. I laugh at this. I can't help myself. Always trying to be the charming gentleman even when he’s passed out on the floor, naked with the stink of me on his cock and his balls soaked in his own come. He’s a sight. I can't help but pity him.

I help him to his feet and lead him to the ottoman. He sits slumped against the bedpost. He breathes heavily through slavering lips, his eyes unfocused and shifty. He needs a glass of water, is what I’m thinking. I remember the tray in the bathroom so I go to retrieve it. He must think I’m making a run for it because he hear him calling after me, his voice panicked. I’m stark naked, Skane, I tell him silently as I cross into the bathroom. Where the hell would I go naked? To bed or to bathe is the only right answer here.

I return with the tray, the smell of our sex thick in the air. Thick, sour, and sweet. I find him in the same spot as where I left him. His eyes are clear and his breathing’s returning to normal. I hand him the water bottle and he drinks from it with both hands clasped childlike around its base. He’s coming back to himself. Now what?
“Better?” I ask Skane.

“How about something a bit more bracing?” he asks. He clearly means the Scotch so I splash some into a glass. He takes it from me and pats the ottoman at his side, gesturing for me to sit, so I sit.

He looks at me and takes-in my whole body. His eyes soften. He likes what he sees. He rubs one of my cheeks with the back of his knuckles. It makes me feel like a precious beautiful delicate thing.

“God, I’ve missed the company of women,” he says. “Ripe beautiful women. Sexy and adorable, delicate and adoring, affectionate and charming. I adore women, adore femininity, know how to make women feel precious. I’ve always had a fantastic awareness of the female intuition. I was an extraordinary lover and a disastrous boyfriend but I would’ve made a devoted father.”

“You never had kids?” I ask.

“I was engaged once. Isabella.” He lapses into glassy-eyed silence. He stares into his Scotch and sips. “Her last name was one of those long Italian names with too many vowels. We called her Bella. She was the prettiest. She called me Aman.”

This is a beautiful word, I think. The way he says it makes it even more beautiful. It sounds like music in his mouth. Where does someone learn to speak like that, I wonder. “What’s Aman mean?” I ask, noting how guttural and common it sounds in my mouth.

“She called me that. No one else called me that.”

“What is it?”

“It’s short for Stellan.”

“What’s Stellan?” I picture a special type of ice on the North Pole or a beautiful cold icy star in Heaven.

“That’s my name.”

“Who’s Skane?” I ask, confused.

“My surname. Skåne.” He pronounces it in a strange way, very different than how Greer and Murdock pronounced it. When I first heard him speak, I supposed he had a speech impediment or was raised wild. This isn’t uncommon. Everyone speaks a bit funny outside of QZs, I’ve come to realize. But he speaks funny in a way I’ve never heard. He’s not from the American Territories. He’s foreign. A tourist. From somewhere exotic. I like this about him. I like the way his lips move when he pronounces these strange words.

“What happened to her?” I ask.

“We were in Monaco for New Year’s Eve. She threw my engagement ring and my phone off the balcony, into the sea. I asked her why she’d treat such beautiful things like that and she said the man who gave her the ring was un domestico—the hired help.” He scoffs derisively. “She was
trying to drag my glorious name down to the commonplace. Title wars were acceptable sport but she punched below the belt. She was a Baronessa, a Milanese rank of nobility from a clan of terrible warlords, murderers, and inbreds who’d been repeatedly banned from the city gates. Dukes and viscounts who’d murdered their parents before their twelfth birthdays and sired fifty children with two dozen wives. Although the way she told those stories was always so charming.”

He rakes his hair and shoves it back from his forehead. “I needed to be reassured someone loved me on New Year’s Eve so I found a phone. My mother was thrilled to hear my voice. She met her once. She looked her over and said, ‘She’s royal blood but she’s Catholic. She won’t do.’” He laughs genially into his chest. “She wanted me to marry a girl with a father like mine and expensive horses. She would’ve bribed me to give her up, anyway. A new yacht, a jet, a countryside chalet wherever I wanted.”

He takes a pull of Scotch and offers it to me. I take it. “Really lovely stuff,” he says. “Huge aroma. Not like that swill you broke-out for your last supper. Champagne goes straight to the legs.”

I take a sip and pass him the glass. He draws it beneath his nose, inhales deep, and takes another sip. He rolls it gently around his mouth. “Burnt heather. An edge of tobacco smoke. A smooth opening and a masterful finish. Very rare, from the year I was born.”

“Which one?” I ask.

“Class of ‘88.”

“You’re old,” I tease.

“Older than Moses,” he says and smiles good-naturedly.

“Where are you from?”

“Swedish by birth and temperament, French by character, British by education, and American by my own adoption.”

“Did you live in all those places?”

“A couple months here, a couple months there. It was always a beautiful game deciding which one of my addresses to give as home. We owned a private island off the coast of Sweden. Our hideaway. I suppose that was the closest thing to home. We spent the summer holidays there.”

“A whole island?”

He shrugs. “It’s just one of the many-thousands in the archipelago.”

“Where’s your family?”

“Across the sea.”

“All of them?”

“All of them.”

“What made you come here?”

“Too many snobs in Europe. Americans always accepted me for what I was, not who I was.” He hands me the glass, hoists onto the bed, and crawls up to the headboard. He collapses onto his back with an airy contented sigh. His head sinks the pillows. He takes-in the coffered ceiling. It’s a very
beautiful ceiling. He must be happy to be among these nice things in this nice home. He must feel at home. He glances at me down the length of his body. “Care to join me?” he asks, and pats the mattress at his side.

I crawl up the bed to him. I lay on my side facing him with my hands tucked between my thighs. He rolls onto his side and faces me. We take each other in. His eyes are watery and soft. His features are exceedingly virile but almost too beautiful for those of a man. I wonder what he thinks about me. I wonder why I should care about this.

He touches my waist and traces my belly. He tucks some of my hair behind my ear and takes my face in his hand. “I always gave my undivided attention to the woman I was with. Made her believe no other woman existed in the world but her, even if I was glancing across the room, looking for someone prettier, lovelier, or more charming. When I told you I loved you, you’d better believe I’d told someone else the exact same thing the night before.”

He laughs dryly. “I was too cynical to be romantic but I’m a generous gracious lover. I’m not the type to sulk, sneer, or offend when my advances are rebuffed. I have little appetite for insecurity. I’m fatigued by insecure insincere interfering women. Yes, I love you. Yes, your hair looks lovely. No, I wasn’t looking at her. No, I’ve never seen her before in my life. I like subtle possessiveness—a healthy part of competition—but when it starts to include petty little things, it’s unendurable.”

“Did you try to get her back?” I ask.

“Get who back?”

“The girl you were engaged to.”

“Why would I do that?” he asks, surprised.

“Why not?”

“If you break a glass, you throw it out. There’s no remedy for a broken engagement, a worn-out relationship, or a dead marriage. I was glad to be done with it, free to get on with my life, to start something new with someone else. If I thought there was another man, I may’ve held on, stuck around for the sake of winning-out over the competition. The spirit of sportsmanship. But I was lucky in love. I always knew when it was time to move on. There’s always another. I was in no hurry to tie myself down. I was relieved it was over. Love needs novelty. I need to be inspired, amused, and adored.”

“You just wanna get your dick wet,” I say. “You don’t care with who.”

“There’s no sin in the indulgence of sex. I don’t practice moderation when I don’t have to. I’d rather boast about my pleasures.”


“I’m demanding. There’s no conceit. And you have no idea the depths of my heart. Whatever you think this is?” He gestures between us. “It’s not.”

I wince at this, a very cruel thing to say. “I think you’re an asshole.”

He scoffs and smiles arrogantly. He’s pleased to have gotten a rise out of me. “And you’re shattered,” he says. “You see him as a hero. A loner and a rebel—you and him against the world—and you don’t like letting him go. You were loyal and devoted, and you don’t understand why that alone wasn’t enough. You act tough and belligerent but you’re quick to concede. You’re
determined to hang-on, to prove your lifelong devotion—the stubborn spirit of endurance. You see it as a cosmic injustice but love’s not fair or reasonable, is it?”

“No,” I whisper. I realize for the first time in a very, very long time, I’m not thinking about Joel. This is something big. I always put him first. His needs and his wants. Before I did anything, I thought of him. How he’d react, what he’d say, and how he’d look at me. The bond between us has been severed. I don’t miss him. I don’t even miss the thought of him.

“Use your head,” he says. “Admit defeat. It’s wiser to do so. Face up to it. Channel your dignity and your pride, and move past it. Don’t cling to old memories. Keep perspective and try to find a little humor in it. Fight for what you want—someone who’ll understand your needs and wants better than him—and then move heaven, earth, and the seven seas to find him. Listen to me. Take my advice. A friend’s advice is one of the only reliable things left in this world.”

“I didn’t ask your advice,” I say. Let him go on thinking I’m still in love with Joel.

“It doesn’t matter,” he laughs blithely. “You’ll be long dead before you come to accept it.”

I think about this for a moment. My sacrifice and the inevitability of my decision to be taken back to the Fireflies. Death’s at the end of it. Tears fill my eyes and run down my cheeks. I wipe them away hastily with the back of my hand. Crying again. Like a well I thought had run dry. I roll away from him onto my other side.

I hear him exhale a sigh of exasperation. A moment later, he spoons into me, raises himself up on an elbow, and tugs at the silk scarf still tied around my neck. He works the knot free and lays the scarf over my face, drying my tears. A kind comforting gesture. I pull the scarf from his hand and press it over my face, unleashing a fresh cycle of sobs. He rolls me over till I’m facing him and he pulls me into an embrace. He holds me tight and lets me cry against his chest until all my tears are shed.

“What hurts the most is you’re alone,” he says, “and it’s how you’ll die. It’s not about the loss of him. I understand why you’re frightened. You’ve dreamed your whole life of trying all sorts of new things and learning more than could ever fill your head. Travelling everywhere and anywhere to far-off places, foreign countries full of foreigners, different people speaking different languages, meeting loads of strange men, and falling in love exactly the way you wanted to fall in love. Well, there’ll be none of that. You’ll die alone and there won’t be anything left after you’re gone but a cure for a world long past its expiration date. You’re trapped, like you’ve climbed to the top of a tree and the only way down’s death. If you’d already done half those things, you wouldn’t be so frightened.”

His words chill me to the bone. I have the acute realization I don’t want to die. Not yet. I’ve done nothing with my life. Nothing. I want to make a difference in the world while I’m still here, not a difference with my death. Why can’t I have both? I want to be loved and I want to love back. Panicked sobs shake my whole body. I thought all my tears were shed but there’s plenty more. “I can’t go on with it,” I say, my voice choked in panic. “I can’t go on. I can’t! I’m not ready to die —”

“There’s no other way!” he yells, interrupting me.

I sob pitifully.

“That’s enough!” he yells, his voice scolding but mild. “Look at you. Full of self-pity and loneliness. Solemn and joyless. You can’t moan endlessly till you die. What kind of way is that to spend your last days on earth? Find enjoyment in every little thing!”
I swallow my tears and raise myself up on an elbow. “You don’t understand,” I say.

“Try me,” he says. He wipes my wet cheeks with the back of his hand.

“When we left Boston,” I say. “I left wanting something so desperately, more than anything else I ever wanted in the whole world. So desperately, it was all I thought about all day and all I dreamt about every night. I went after it with all of my will and know-how, and all of his help and strength, and then it slipped right through my fingers. I had to sit back and pretend it was okay, trick myself into thinking it was God’s will, or fate, or just bad luck. And then, when I finally got over the disappointment and bitterness, and accepted it was beyond my control, it’s been handed back to me.”

“On a gold platter with all the trimmings,” he says with a smile. “From the Gates of Hell to the Gates of Paradise.” He reaches across me to the bedside dresser, grabs a votive candle, and hands it to me. I hold it with both hands and watch the licking flame, comforted by the warmth and appreciative of the gesture. “Better to light one small candle than to walk around the darkness, cursing,” he says.

He brings me great comfort. I’ve cried myself out, and all I want now is comfort and companionship. He understands me. He listens to me. He has smart answers to all my questions. I suppose I could be happy to live with someone like him for the rest of my life but the rest of my life will be very, very short.

He dips his fingers into his glass of Scotch, and sprinkles drops onto my belly and thighs. He climbs between my legs and starts licking-up the drops with his tongue. “Lemme fill you up again,” he says. “Tell me how you wanna be loved.”
Chapter Twenty-Five

Watery sunrise washes the estate pink and orange. I watch the play of sunlight from the pick-up truck flatbed where I sit, backed against the cabin window. My hands are cuffed and hitched to the steel roll bar. Black garbage bags pile the flatbed around me, loaded with pilfered loot from the pool house.

Three figures approach. Murdock and Greer, marching Joel with his arms bound behind his back. I can tell by the way he holds his body he’s weary and defeated. His right cheek’s bruised in high color. His left eye’s black and grotesquely swollen shut. His beard’s crusted red in dried blood. This should fill me with pity but it doesn’t. He deserves it. It’s a fraction of the suffering he’s put me through.

Murdock backs him against the tailgate, and he and Greer haul him to my side. I watch as his handcuffed arms are locked next to mine. My eyes go wide in disbelief. His watch is gone—the most precious thing he owns in this world. As long as I’ve known him, it’s never been forgotten, and rarely removed or laid down. Often touched by instinct, it’s his family and kin. He intended to grow old and die with it strapped to his wrist. Without it, he’s lost. Once it’s been taken, everything else can be taken away from him.

Who cares? I shift as far away from him as my handcuffs allow. I feel terrible revulsion even thinking about our bodies touching. I know he notices this and I don’t care. Let him feel my disgust. I think to myself it’s very good my hands are cuffed to this roll bar or else I’d tear him apart.

Skane arrives with more loot. Bulged travel bags slung over his shoulders. He drops them at the back of the truck. He doesn’t look at me. He’s purposely avoiding my eyes, treating me like I don’t exist. After everything we shared last night. It’s better this way. What’d be the point? I won’t exist for much longer. Joel and I are living on borrowed time. This is clear. Murdock loads up the flatbed and climbs into the cabin with Skane. Greer joins us in the flatbed and hitches the tailgate shut. Time to go.

“Where are we going?” Joel asks him. “How long’s the ride?”

Greer ambles toward Joel. His eyes are bleary and red-rimmed. He’s probably still drunk from last night. He cracks his rifle stock into Joel’s chest, Joel bellows, his handcuffs rattling the roll bar as he recoils. I can smell the unmetabolized alcohol coming off Greer’s body. He’s still drunk. He swerves clumsily against the tailgate and sits. He smacks the side of the flatbed and tracks us down his rifle barrel raised to combat-ready.

The engine chokes and fires. We pull onto the road. We drive through a couple abandoned towns with schools, strip malls, gas stations, and parks. Everything’s covered in dust. We merge onto a wide interstate highway, and weave rusted overloaded vehicles blanketed in sandy mire and lashed to the ground in thick ivy blankets. Greer’s complexion turns sickly green. He drops his head over the side of the flatbed and pukes raucously.

Clear sun swings the skyline. Wind roars my ears and batters the garbage bags piled at my feet. We veer off the interstate, loop an auxiliary road, and merge onto a wide highway. Greer’s head sways
lazily and slumps against his chest. He lids-down and falls asleep, lulled by the meditative tire tread.

Joel calls my name.

I don’t respond, shrinking away from him in disgust. Don’t speak to me, I yell at him silently. I don’t even want to hear your voice speaking to me. I want to say this to him. I really want to say this but I won’t. I don’t want to give him the privilege of hearing my voice nor the satisfaction of seeing my anger.

He repeats my name a couple more times, his voice rising in urgency.

I don’t respond. I care little if he lives or dies, or if I ever hear his voice again. How’s it possible to hate him with such malice and loathing, after loving him so dearly? I hate the feel of his body next to mine. His smell, his voice, and his manner. I’ve never done anything to warrant his betrayal and distrust. I’m innocent. I was loyal and dedicated. He threw it all away.

He clears his throat and speaks. “I reckon you’re thinking a whole mess of mean notions about me, cursing my name and the day I was born. Well, go ahead and think it if it makes you feel any better. I ain’t the snake you think I am. I reckon you’ve got reason to think it. I reckon I had it coming, reckon deep down you’d figure it out. I figured you’d hate me. You’d hear it and hate me. I should’ve told you long ago. Maybe there would’ve been a chance back then. I knew it’d hurt you so much you’d never look at me again. I lived this whole time fearing you’d find out the truth and despise me. Maybe someday you’ll understand and forgive me but it ain’t a bit of use trying to explain it now. I always figured I’d give you a straight answer when I was damn good and ready, and I still ain’t—if that’s any use to you.”

He exhales one long breath. “I don’t know what’s coming off, Ellie, but it doesn’t look good for me. That’s a fact. I played the game—played damn hard—and this is part of the price I’ve gotta pay. What happened is done. All my efforts and sacrifices came to nothing. All them hellish miles crossed in agony, I delivered you straight into the hands of assassins. A grim journey through an even grimmer country with death waiting at the end. A cruel merciless theft of your life and my dignity.

“I’ve been silent for too long. It’s time to set things straight between us. Remember when you asked me if I believed in Heaven and Hell? I don’t know about Heaven, but if Hell exists, this is it. God’s long gone. Or if He’s here, He’s not on our side. Even if sacred places have been spared desecration, there’s no worshipers left for praying. A bullet doesn’t care how holy or blessed you are. You’re just blood, flesh, and bone made for destroying.

“Tomorrow’ll be no better than today. Not with your sacrifice, not with no cure, not with no vaccine. There’s no cure for the horror that’s condemned mankind. The only ones left on this foul earth are jailers, butchers, murderers, and marauders—brutes in human form who value nothing but murder. Hopeless evasive men who consume each other for sport, tear the visceral outta their living victims, and eat their prey alive in front of their kin. Mankind’s temper’s growing more violent and uncontrollable every day. Cruel, stubborn, and vindictive. The body he walks this earth may look like the two legs of man but his real nature’s slithering around on his belly.

“Some things can’t be stopped from happening but the thing to do now is to keep it from going further. The cards have been shuffled and dealt. All you can do now is play-out your hand. I can no longer tell you what’s gonna happen. Each day you rise, you’ve gotta decide for yourself. When the world opens up like Hell before your eyes, remember my words and remember them good. You must survive. Remember it always, even in your darkest moments. Never surrender. Never back down till the last breath’s drawn, the last ounce of energy’s expended, and the last brace of
willpower’s bent.

“You can’t shorten your suffering, you can only endure it. Bear each moment—it’ll pass. Bear the next—it’ll pass. Moment by moment, instant by instant, cut-off the past and the future. No one with any intelligence would allow themselves to imagine anything but the present no how.

He sighs deep. “It took a whole lotta pretty little lies to lead you through them big drifts, hedged-in on all sides by things as they oughtn’t to be. You’re gonna have to look terrible things straight in the eye without quivering your chin. It’s the only way they’ll skulk-off and leave you be.

“You were born into a war without allies. You’ll die in conflict with little peace in-between. Your fate’s strife, and all its cruel and foul things. Everyone born’s been appointed your killer. You move among enemies. Trust no one—not a goddamn soul.”

“Get up,” a cruel bass voice says over the rude sound of clanking steel. I open my eyes and shut them immediately, too dazed to process anything. Rough hands hoist me to my feet. I open my eyes to menacing guards in mismatched tactical gear stripped from military and factions. These aren’t military men. These aren’t even rebels. These are common vagrants acting as guards.

“What do you want?” I ask, my tongue heavy in sleep.

“Hands on your fucking head,” a guard says. He wears squalid fatigues and a dingy plastic compass strapped to his wrist like a watch. These are not well-connected men. Dirt poor. “Do as you’re told!” He jabs an assault rifle muzzle into my shoulder, driving me into the wall. “Don’t make me say it again!” The men grab me and lead me from the large empty windowless cell where I’d spent the night shivering over the rough cement floor.

I’ve been locked in this barren cell since yesterday after Joel and I were delivered to this place, a three-story brick building with a slate roof, which sits at the center of a dispiriting complex of smaller brick dormitories. It looks like a corrective institution because I suppose that’s what it is. A prison on a large campus surrounded by twenty-foot brick walls topped with razor wire and patrolled by armed guards. The front gates are flanked by a makeshift barricade of rusted charred school buses, five-ton trucks, and state police cruisers with shot-out windows.

I’m led down the hall lit in early morning light by windows gridded in steel bars. We pass a command post where guards crowd an L-shaped banquette and pass around hand-rolled cigarettes. Their uniforms are blossomed in oil, dirt, and blood. Their assault rifles are down-market mods. Their cartridge belts are empty and baggy.

We cross into a grand foyer with a cathedral ceiling and double-volume windows. One story below, guards patrol the open hall of large iron radiators and a walk-in fireplace with lofty columns. We take one flight of stairs up the large central staircase rung in a stately balustrade to a long hallway. At the end of the hall, double doors swing open to a very large man in a navy utility uniform.

“Ellie,” he says. “Welcome to Providence.” This is the man who runs this place. Anyone could tell by his grooming, his manner, and his clothes. I’m led into a large airy reception hall. Indifferent guards stand around and fondle their assault rifles with undisciplined fingers. The large man wears
hobnail boots, its thick rubber soles laid in shiny metal studs. They clack loudly over the hardwood floors, What’s the point of these boots in such a place? He sounds like a woman in heels. These are the kinds of boots you’d wear if you raised sheep on a steep snowy mountainside, not in a prison with hardwood floors. I don’t like these boots and I don’t like this man. He’s got very good protection to be able to wear these boots.

“Set yourself down,” he says and gestures to a coffee table set with mismatched dining room chairs. I sit. Tall paneled windows run the entire length of the opposite wall cast in early morning light. I’m glad to be reminded the sun exists outside of this foul place. He squares in front of me and frames his waist ring in a leather drop-belt stuffed with two heavy-handled revolvers. A great mass of clipped keys dangle his stiff jeans. “My name’s Eph. I reckon you’ve heard of me.”

I’ve never heard of him. I have no idea who he is.

“They call me the Big Voice. I run this place. Order, rule, command, and edict. Law, judge, and jury. No appeals. Ain’t that some gospel? My only superior’s God in Heaven. What do you wanna know?” He speaks in a booming baritone with a Southern lilt. Every gesture suggests belligerence, arrogance, and barely-contained violence. “Don’t you wanna know where you are? Why you’re here? What’s gonna happen to you?”

I don’t need to say anything because he’s the kind of man who’ll make clear what he wants me to know. He runs a hand over his black oiled wavy hair, smoothing it into place. His face is pink and freshly-shaven, out-of-place among the squalor of the prison and the guards. He throws back his wide chest and paces the floor in front of me. His boots clack unnervingly. “Roll call’s held in the courtyard after sunrise.” He glances toward the windows, which I assume look out onto the courtyard. “Then announcements and exercise. The sick go to the Dentist and the ones fit enough to work sweep the grounds until four. You get breakfast and a midday meal, and dinner’s served after evening roll call. Free time’s till seven, then lights out.” He shifts his hands to parade rest. “You’ve got nothing to ask me? Nothing to say at all?”

I don’t respond.

“Don’t be a nuisance. Don’t meddle with what doesn’t concern you and we’ll get along fine.”

I toss my uneaten dinner ration into a five-gallon plastic bucket. The bucket’s my only furniture. Two of them. One with an inch of undrinkable water and the other empty for my toilet. If I need to leave anything from my body it goes into this bucket. After introductions with Eph, I was moved to a new cell. A smaller one with a door of steel bars. Along the back wall there’s a squat rectangular window painted black. The casement handles have been sawed-off, and the latches and joints have been welded shut. No fresh air, no light, no escape.

Three daily meals arrive in a small plastic bowl with no cutlery. Breakfast was rancid wheat brew-up. Lunch was boiled weeds with a small grey potato. Dinner was watery grains with gravel and maggots, and a thumb-sized piece of boiled carrot.

I hate this place. I hate it here. There must be no worse place that exists in the world. Even if they take me to the Fireflies tomorrow morning, it’d be one night too many to stay here.
I sit on the scabbed concrete floor and draw my knees to my chin. I feel like I want to cry, utterly
alone among strangers. Beyond my cell, male voices echo the hallway, softer and more colorful
than the guttural grunts and brusque commands of the guards. I suppose it’s the other prisoners.
My first cell was in an isolated wing, silent and drafty. I like hearing these men’s voices but the
hallway outside my cell smells worse. Bodies too close together. Confined men who can’t wash or
change their clothes. I suppose it’s not their fault. I suppose they’re used to it but I’m not. The smell
is horrible.

After lights out, their voices turn edgier. No one seems to enjoy lights out.

“I feel like a song,” a baritone voice says, echoing from the cell. “Anyone got an objection?” No
one objects. The man starts singing a pleasant folk verse until hasty footsteps approach from the
direction of the command post and a guard tells him to shut up or he’ll break his jaw. Shortly after
comes the sound of rough retching. Someone’s vomiting. Not the kind of vomiting to bring
something up but the kind from utter visceral disgust.

“Karate Kid,” a voice says. “You alright?”

“I can’t take this shit no more,” Karate Kid says, his voice distorted over a bucket. He retches,
gasps wetly, burps, and vomits again.

“If it ain’t poison, it’s grub,” a voice says.

“Sounds like poison,” another says. “Providence’s finest swill.”

“At least he made it to the bucket,” a voice says.

“A new record,” another says. “Held it down almost a whole hour.”

“It’s his goddamn ulcers,” a voice says.

“Nah,” another says. “Karate Kid’s spoiled. Raised on all that fancy seafood—oysters, lobster
rolls, clam bellies. Me and Husky are the only sonsofbitches who can’t count our ribs. Tell them
how we get ‘er done, Husky.”

“The trick is,” Husky says, “you imagine you’re eating the best meal in the world. Hot smoked
brisket, pork sausage, red eye gravy, a side of beans, cold potato salad, and buttermilk biscuits.
Chow down on them maggots and tell them to go fuck themselves!”

Laughter erupts.

“I haven’t been hungry in twenty years,” Karate Kid says. “The world’s rotten. This place is rotten.
My luck’s rotten. I can’t take no more.”

“You wanna die?” a voice asks.

“That’s a dumb question,” Karate Kid says.

“Why’s it dumb?”

“Cause I don’t wanna live no more. Nothing matters. Nothing matters at all. I’m done with y’all.”

“And you smell like old hot dog water,” a voice laughs.

“Hot beef franks,” another says with nostalgic longing. “Roasted salted peanuts. Ice cold beer.”
“Fresh bread with melted butter,” a voice says. “The dough moist and hot with flakey chewy crusts.”

“Fat blue catfish freshly-caught,” another says, “fried in cornmeal and butter, with steaming hot coffee.”

“Sweet and smoky spare ribs,” a voice says.

“Thanksgiving fixings,” another says. “Turkey, duck, goose, sweet potatoes, cornbread, fresh cider, and pecan and pumpkin pie.”

“Osso buco and an unbashful Barbaresco,” a voice says.

“Shut your bitch-ass up, Frenchy,” another says. “You need a strong antibiotic and a good delousing, not your fancy French bullshit.”

“I’m Italian, you dumb fuck!” Frenchy yells. “It looks like you’ve been getting beauty treatments with all them bandages on your face.”

Laughter erupts.

A rich baritone cuts through the voices. “What about you, Tigerman? What’s your last supper?”

“Fuck grub,” Tigerman says. “I just want a moment of privacy from all y’all sonsofbitches. Y’all never shut the fuck up. Half y’all talk in your sleep!”

“You’re stuck with us forever, brother,” the baritone voice says. “We bastards are gonna outlive everyone. We ain’t even worth killing.”

Soft laughter fades, and the hallway quiets and stills. I curl fetal and drift to sleep, comforted by the presence of the men.
The next morning, I’m already awake as guards pull me from my cell and march me to Eph’s office.

I had a restless night of sleep. I woke in the middle of the night to blood-curdling screams coming from a couple floors below. A man’s piercing cries counted from one to ten, each number punctuated by a loud crack. The man was forced to count each blow he received, followed by his agonized screams.

Eph sits at a large wood desk near the tall panel windows. I’m shoved into a chair at the head of it set with a glass water pitcher and a tumbler. He scrawls equations into a leather-bound tally ledger with a goose quill. Lead’s been melted down and poured onto it to make a pencil. His hair’s groomed to perfection. His face’s freshly-shaved. Shiny, pink, and scrubbed. He pours a glass of water and drinks it lustily. I realize I’m parched. I haven’t drank anything for days. Not since Scotch with Skane. How long can you go without water? Two weeks? Three weeks? I don’t like thinking about this.

“Anything to ask me today?” he asks.

“I’d like some water,” I say.

“Anyone in your position would.”

“Can I have some?”

“I’m sorry. That’s impossible.”

“What’s the price?”

“Never mind the price.”

“You have no idea what I can or can’t afford.”

He smiles cruelly. My answer pleases him. He pours water into a glass and slides it toward me but keeps his fingers over the rim so I can’t take it without a fight. “Tell me everything you know about the Fireflies’ headquarters at St. Mary’s.”

He’s bargaining water for intel. I take a moment to think about this. Why does he care about the logistics of St. Mary’s? This doesn’t make any sense. Eph’s men aren’t fit to deliver me to St. Mary’s better yet tie their own shoes. I’ve seen their shoes. Most of them don’t even own a matching pair of the same size or style.

I figure Eph’s role in the bounty is as a retainer. Providence as a stronghold. I’m being kept here until the next group tasked with delivering me to Salt Lake City arrives. You can’t convince me otherwise. If Eph’s asking for intel, I suppose he plans on double-crossing them. Why wouldn’t he? A man like him would double-cross his own mother. I suppose he intends to invade St. Mary’s with his men and capture it himself. He probably doesn’t even care about the bounty at all. He wants to be the king of the cure. Ransack the labs, hold the biologists hostage, and claim their
research for himself. Why would he think it’s possible? I think about this. I suppose anyone would think the same thing after reading the story of what happened on my bounty. If one man killed 57 Fireflies and lived to tell the tale, I’d probably think the same thing. Imagine how easy it’d be with a whole army of men.

“How many battalions are there?” he asks. “Who’s in charge? How big’s their fleet?”

My suspicion’s confirmed. He plans on storming St. Mary’s. Good luck with that. “I don’t know,” I say.

“What don’t you know?” he asks.

“I don’t remember.”

“Don’t make this hard.”

I don’t respond.

“Spitting cotton?” he asks. “Like you could light a match on the roof of your mouth?” He picks up the glass and drinks, staring me down the rim, draining it in broad loud gulps. He sets down the glass defiantly and drags the back of his hand across his wet lips. “Bring up your chair,” he says and gestures at the windows. “The show’s about to start.”

I drag my chair to the windows. The view looks out onto a large rectangular open-air interior courtyard on the ground floor. We’re three stories up. It’s framed on three sides by brick dormitory walls scarred in gunfire artifacts. The fourth wall is a wire-mesh fence topped in razor wire with a sliding gate in the middle. On the dormitory roofs, sentry guards pace between small guardhouses with scoped sniper and assault rifles held at low alert. The ground shows signs of heavy use. A dark ugly scarred patch of dirt and gravel with no grass, trees, or bushes.

Eph stands at my side. Powdery leafy perfume comes off his starched utility uniform. I have no idea what this smell is but it’s a strange smell for a man. He keeps his hands clasped to the small of his back at parade rest. His energy’s restless. “Reckon we’re gonna have some fun,” he says.

The fence gate rolls back and a dozen guards saunter into the courtyard. They’re followed by dozens of prisoners in identical slip-on canvas sneakers. Their hair’s shaved-down to harsh stubble, and their beards are clipped-down and patchy. Guards stand around and pass hand-rolled cigarettes to each other.

“Fall in!” a bald stocky guard yells at the prisoners. He wears tall jump boots and a shoulder-rigged M16. An upmarket gun. His boots match and they’re the same size. He must be a VIP. He’s the drill sergeant, is what I’m thinking. Prisoners mill toward the center and fan into four neat rows of ten. They wear identical long-sleeve industrial work shirts, faded and shrunken in weather with the seams frayed raw. A large hand-drawn P is painted on the backs of their shirts in red, I suppose it stands for Prisoner.

“Attention!” the drill sergeant yells.

Prisoners snap their bodies into pristine posture. Their shoulders square and their chests lift high. Their eyes strain forward, their thumbs arrow their thighs, and their toes turn-out from their heels.

“Dress right!”

The front row raises their left arms, touches their neighbors’ shoulders, and shifts until they space evenly. Row by row, they pull into a groomed squad.
“Ready front!”

The men drop their arms to their sides.

“Count off!”

“One!” a black prisoner yells from the far right corner, his arm cradled to his chest in a dirty cloth sling. I watch the men shout ascending numbers, row-by-row. I realize these must be the same prisoners I hear from my cell.

“Forty!” the last man yells—Joel’s voice. It’s Joel, recognizable only by his voice. His hair’s gone, his head freshly shorn. His beard’s clipped down to coarse thin harsh blue-black stubble. His face is pale and his neck’s stained in livid purple welts. An enormous black gash cleaves his cheek, and his eye is dark and swollen shut. His head’s set aggressively and his jaw’s firm but he looks fragile and young. Vulnerable and delicate.

“Forward march!” the drill sergeant yells.

Prisoners shuffle into a single column and jog around the courtyard perimeter.

“Double time! March! Move, you bastards!”

After two laps, a tall Latino prisoner lags behind, his head drooping his chest. As he passes a group of guards, one slams his boot into his shin and stumbles him to the ground. They all laugh. The prisoner cautiously rises and rejoins the others in a hobbled gait.

“Fall in!” the drill sergeant yells.

The prisoners assemble into neat rows and the drill sergeant leads them through military drills. Push-ups, jumping jacks, sit-ups, lunges, and windmills. They continue till the drill sergeant calls them at ease. They catch their breath and wipe down their sweaty faces, their shirts stained dark with sweat.

I hear the frenzied vicious barking of large aggressive dogs coming from beyond the courtyard. It doesn’t mean anything to me but it clearly does to the prisoners because their bodies stiffen and their faces ice-over. The sliding gate rolls back and three burly handlers stomp through with large thick-set Pit Bulls on chain-link leads. The dogs have snapping fangs, battle-cropped ears, and small close-set eyes.

Eph cracks open a window and yells, “Hunt!”

The handlers bend over the frenzied snarling dogs. They unclip the leads and thrash police batons against their haunches. The dogs rocket into the courtyard. Terrorized prisoners scatter and crash into each other. Some tumble to the ground. Others latch onto the fence and climb toward the razor coils. Excitable guards smash their stocks into their hands and feet, knocking them to the ground. A snarling dog corners a stocky Latino prisoner and vices his arm, drawing blood. His panicked screams echo off the brick walls.

Eph looks at me. He’s amused. “Notice how no one goes to help him? The wounded only think about saving themselves. They accept the inevitability of their fate and face-up to their limits. Without a second thought, they calculate their chances of survival. In the battle between man and beast, there comes a moment of great truth. A weighing-up of the value of life. The one with the greatest life force dominates the other.”

The snarling dogs circle each other. They’ve forgotten about the prisoners and start fighting each
other. The sliding gate rolls back and the handlers sprint over, shouting sharp commands. They beat them with their batons, latch-on leashes, and lead them away.

“Show’s over,” Eph says. He closes the window and sits at his desk. “Bring up your chair.” He gestures at the head of his desk.

I drag over my chair and perch the seat.

“Pain ain’t always a bad thing,” he says. “You can discipline criminals without harming them but these dumb bastards lack the ability to learn. They can’t be taught or educated. Shiftless, idle, and useless. Hard work’ll be their salvation, their virtuous path. Their Providence.”

“What you’re doing’s sick,” I say. “It’s wrong. It’s immoral.”

“It’s noble,” he says emphatically. “God humbles deep pride and arrogance. I help these men gain deep humility. Once they’re on the other side of their injuries, they’re thankful. One can only fully appreciate the gift of life once it’s been threatened.”

This isn’t a proper jail, I realize. Proper jails have rules and order. They have protocol and they have to answer to a higher authority. None of this exists here. Any of these prisoners could be killed at any moment for no reason at all. There are no repercussions for this kind of behavior. Eph and his men don’t have to answer to anyone. What kind of men would do this? Filth, squalor, and violence aside, this is the most chilling aspect of this place. Lawlessness.

He reposes in his chair and tents his fingertips. “Now, I’mma ask you about the Fireflies and you’d better have an answer. Who’s in charge of St. Mary’s? How great are their numbers? What are their weapons? How big’s the armory? How many battalions?”

I don’t respond. Why should I tell him anything?

“I’ve got time but I don’t like wasting it. You’ve got ten seconds to tell me the truth. All of it.”

“I don’t remember,” I say.

“That ain’t the answer I want and I mean to have it.”

“I can’t tell you what I don’t know.”

“This is getting damn monotonous.”

“Even if I knew, I wouldn’t tell you!”

He leans forward with his palms flat on the desk. His eyes pull into blazing slits. “You oughta do what I tell you.”

“What?”

“Meaning I’m mighty clever at getting undesirables outta my way. I ain’t swallowing your lies.”

“Why am I still here?” I yell. “Who’s taking me to the Fireflies and when?”

“That’s none of your damn business.” He wrenches open a desk drawer, pulls out his tally ledger and quill, and slides it toward me across the desk. “Draw me a map. St. Mary’s. The floorplan. The lab, the operating room, the armory, the guard’s quarters. All of it.”

I shove the ledger back at him. He comes over, grabs my arm, and jerks me to my feet. I cry out
and fight against him. Guards surround us. He flips-open his ledger to a clean sheet and slams the quill over it. “Draw it!” he yells, his face fulminating red. “Don’t make me say it again.” He straightens his rigging and puffs out his chest. He turns pompously to the guards and addresses them, telling them to stand down.

As he does this, I take the quill and scrawl FUCK YOU across the sheet. I know this is childish. I know this is foolish. I don’t care. He returns his attention to me and rips away the ledger. I watch him study the message I left for him. He bellows fury and sweeps the ledger across the side of my face. I lurch against the desk, dazed from the blow. Warm thick blood gushes my nose.

“Damn foolish child!” he yells. “Ain’t got no sense in that head of yours?” He teases his shirt cuffs across his thick wrists. “Next time you fuss with me, I’mma really hit you. You got that?”

You could light a match on me, I’m so angry. I want to crush him like vermin and scatter his remains to the four corners of the world but I won’t give him the satisfaction of seeing my rage. I feign composure, licking the blood from my lips as the guards lead me from the room.

————

I rouse in the middle of the night from the distressed delirious screams of one of the prisoners, coming from down the hall. I’m parched and dizzy. My head throbs, and my cheek’s swollen and bruised. A long tender gash oozes a steady stream of blood down my neck.

“Tigerman!” a deep bass voice yells from the prisoners’ cell. “Shut your bitch-ass up! I’m trying to sleep!”


“Go fuck yourself, Bishop,” Day-Day says. “His screaming ain’t helping no one.”

“Man,” Bishop says, “I’m done with you and your little man problems. You’re the biggest bitch around here.”

“And you’re the ugliest!” Day-Day yells.

“And you need a tampon for all them emotions you’re having.”

“Are you calling me a fag, you little bitch?”

“Man, move on!” Bishop yells. “I done gave you an answer. You’re either too stupid to figure it out or you’re too insecure to come out. Either way it’s on you and the dick in your mouth.”

“Well, goddamn! Looks like I’m about to call you my favorite word: bitch!”

“Young man, look here. There’s other homos like yourself in the world. You don’t gotta accept the truth. The truth just is.”

“The truth is,” a voice laughs, “Day-Day knows how to deep-throat a dick!”

“Your momma taught me!” Day-Day yells back. “On her pocket knife-sized clit!”
“You take dick off your chin daily!” another voice yells.

The cell erupts laughter. The sound of aggressive footsteps approach from the command post, followed by the strident clacking of metal. I picture a guard striking the steel bars with the butt of his gun. “If y’all bitches don’t shut the fuck up,” the guard’s voice yells, “I’mma break some necks! Are we clear?”

“Clear,” a chorus of weary men’s voices answers and the footsteps retreat. Tigerman’s screams muffle to soft plush moans. Something’s been stuffed into his mouth, is what I’m picturing.

“You’re gonna freeze without your shirt,” a voice says.


A surprised squeal breaks the silence, I picture coming from Friday. “Get your fucking hands outta there, Bishop!” he yells.

The prisoners laugh.

“This bullshit world,” Bishop says. “Who would’ve thought one day we’d be cursing a brother screaming in pain ‘cause we can’t get no sleep?”

Funny his name’s Bishop, I think to myself, like the man in the photo from Sacred Way. There’s no way it’s him. The chances are too slim.

“Tigerman’s getting too old to be squabbing and stomping them out,” a voice says. “He should be home chasing his grandkids around, showing them how to finger-paint and shit.”

“Brickyard Brawler whacking bulls!” another yells. “The bullwhacker!”

“I whacked a bull once,” Bishop says.

“You ran like a little bitch!” Day-Day laughs.

“A bull dyke!” Bishop laughs.

“You trying to tell us some shit?” Day-Day asks.

“Back when I lived in Chicago,” Bishop says. “Six-figure salary, executive perks. I was the young blood making waves in their circles. Old money and big power. So guess who they sent to wine and dine a new client? She was an up-and-coming rapper, an old school hood turned diva supreme, and lemme be clear with y’all—her body was banging! She was a beauty before she got all that fat shot-up into her ass.

“After dinner, we went to the bar and she asked me all the kinda questions from a woman who wanted to pound. Two in the morning and ten tanquerays later, I handed her the key to my suite and told her she was sexy as fuck. ‘I’mma bust you wide open from sun-up to sundown,’ I was like. She looked at me straight and told me she was a lesbian. ‘Girl, you eat pussy? No disrespect.’ ‘Yes, I do,’ she was like, so I was like, ‘Well, you might be getting some dick moves if you take this key. You can kick it with whoever you want but I’mma still pound you raw—’”

A tenor voice interrupts. “You know that deep connection you feel with a woman? That deep bond? Homo stuff don’t give them that. It’s play love.”

“Real facts,” a voice says. “God created woman to fuck man and multiply. When a cat’s barking,
something’s wrong. When a dog’s meowing, something’s wrong.”

“Who the fuck raised y’all, man?” Bishop asks. “If y’all don’t like gay people, don’t chill with them. If y’all don’t like gay sex, don’t swallow a dick. If y’all don’t like gay marriage, don’t marry a gay man. Why are y’all worried about other folks’ lives? Mind your own goddamn business!”


Bishop continues his story. ‘She told me she treated her pussy like gold and wasn’t gonna let any old brother run up in her. I asked her if she was the man position and she asked me what that meant. ‘The dominant one,’ I go. ‘Not the girly-girly one.’ ‘What do you think?’ she goes, so I told her it didn’t matter ‘cause I bet she knew how to lick well. She had them kinda lips that could take a brother deep. She grabbed my key, grabbed my dick, and was like, ‘Position filled!’”

The cell erupts laughter.

“Okay,” Day-Day says, “but you’re still gay and she’s still a dyke.”

“How’s that work, Day-Day?” Bishop laughs.

“You don’t gotta be gay to be a homo.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Bishop says. “I came anyway. All over them pretty tits and tight little ass!”

“I know when a brother ain’t getting pussy,” Day-Day says. “Save the lies!”

“Bitch, you do not tell me when I’ve fucked. You have not one clue let alone an idea. You serve no purpose. You’ve got no value. You ain’t proud of nothing.”

“So what are you proud of, little man?” Day-Day asks.

“I got out,” Bishop says, his voice full of pride. “A den of snakes. Wasn’t worth my soul. I know where I am, where I was born and where I was raised, and I was none of that. Them’s old money. Tons of dough. Collecting dough like folks collect stamps, coins, and kicks. Rich folks eating fancy food in big cribs, little planes, and fast cars. Collecting girls who only know how to lay on their backs and get down on their knees, have a baby and collect child support. Them’s ballers. Hope they enjoyed collecting their money. Now they’re the richest men in the graveyard!” He laughs unguardedly and the prisoners join in.

I laugh, too, the first time I remember laughing in a long, long time. I curl fetal over the cold floor and rest my head over my folded arm. I’m thankful for the company of these men. Despite the squalid conditions, filth, disease, and injustice of this place, their fellowship’s genuine and sincere. They’re full of rough humor, brotherhood, and friendship. They pass easily into another world where their present misery’s suspended. They’re sustained by the strength of warm memories and goodness. I don’t know what they did to deserve being locked-up here and I don’t care. These are good men.
Chapter Twenty-Seven

The next morning, I’m marched to Eph’s office and shoved into the chair overlooking the courtyard to watch military drills unfold, just as punishing as yesterday. When it’s over, I hear the same barking snarling dogs beyond the courtyard walls. The handlers appear with a trio of Pit Bulls with battle-cropped ears and docked tails.

Eph yells, “Hunt,” through the open window and the prisoners scatter.

A large dog rockets into a tall black prisoner cowering at Joel’s side, knocking him to the ground. The dog clamps onto the man’s wrist and winches rabidly. Joel wallops the dog’s ribs with his foot till it lays silent and still. He pries apart the dog’s jaw and frees the man’s mangled arm. The man gestures frantically at another dog racing toward them and they leap away as it smashes into the brick wall right where they’d been standing. Joel grabs the dazed dog by its collar and punches the back of its skull till its red tongue slips between its bloodied jowls.

Screams erupt from the courtyard center. A short Asian prisoner fends-off the last dog, circling to attack. Joel sprints over and slams his foot into the dog’s ribs. It yelps and shrieks till Joel smashes its head to red pulp.

“Get him!” Eph yells through the window. “Get the Fortieth Man!”

The sliding gate rolls back. Guards swarm Joel and pin him to the ground. The drill sergeant whistles piercingly in Eph’s direction and looks up at him, awaiting his orders.

Eph yells down to him, “ Seems like it’s time for some tenderizing!”

Guards whoop and strut, excited at the prospect of tenderizing, whatever that means. The drill sergeant orders the prisoners to fall-in and calls them to attention. They dress into four neat rows of ten, their faces hurried and tense. Handlers grind wheelbarrows across the courtyard and solemnly cart away the dogs’ corpses.

The drill sergeant strides up and down the rows of men, inspecting them. When he reaches Joel, he halts in front of him, and stares at him fixedly with his jaw thrust forward and his mouth downturned. “You’ve done a damned dumb thing, you goddamn cocksucker. What do you gotta say about that?”

Joel keeps his eyes fixed straight ahead, and his brow smooth and unswerving. The drill sergeant flips up his rifle and heaves the stock into Joel’s abdomen. Joel howls and bends in half, cradling his sides. Thick saliva trickle his gnarled mouth to the gravel between his feet. He tries to catch his breath, his shoulders churning.

The drill sergeant pulls into Joel’s face. “You’re trying to get your dumb ass beat, ain’t you?”

Joel doesn’t respond.

“Ain’t you or ain’t you not?” he yells. “Speak up!”

“No,” Joel says through ragged breath.
“No…Sir!”

“No, Sir.”

“Stand at attention, you cock-riding bitch!”

Joel pulls himself up full length. This isn’t good for the drill sergeant because Joel towers a whole head over him. He has to tilt up his face to look at him.

“Stand at attention when I tell you to stand!” the drill sergeant yells and paces around him, inspecting his posture. “Heels together, toes out!” He kicks Joel’s feet into proper position. “Lift your chest!” He jabs Joel’s chest with a knifed hand. “Shoulders square!” He cocks his head arrogantly. “Never seen a square, you goddamn retard?”

“Yeah,” Joel says.

“Sir!”

“Sir.”

“A retard like you gotta momma, boy?”

“No, Sir.”

“That’s a lie, you cock-sucker!”

Joel doesn’t respond.

“You’re a mistake! Your momma was a mistake! Ain’t that right?”

Joel doesn’t respond.

“I didn’t hear you, boy!”

“Yes, Sir,” Joel says, his voice deeply graveled.

“God was taking a day off and by some slip of the rules, you slithered outta your momma’s stank pussy when no one was looking. Born into a steaming pile of afterbirth from a pussy so stretched-out, you could walk through it and make a U-turn. Lips like a leather sandwich. My dick would get soft fucking that bitch, the sloppiest toppy this side of creation! Ain’t it, boy?”

Joel’s jaw tightens and his hands clench into fists. His body vibrates fury.

“You’re something God never intended to survive!” the drill sergeant continues. “You should’ve never been born! You’re a goddamn bottom-bitch! Sin in the eyes of the Lord. Your momma’s a black sheep bitch with soft suck lips. Baaaaaa, baaaaaa, bastard! Born in sin, boy, born in sin!”

Joel growls visceral rage. He winds back an arm and uppercuts the drill sergeant’s chin, his head snapping backward. I gasp. A hush falls over the whole courtyard. Guards clutch their sub-machine guns, their muscles straining with reflexive readiness.

The drill sergeant stands dazed, blood trickling the corner of his mouth and snaking his sweaty neck. He drags his fingers across his bloody mouth, looks at them, and bellows savagely. He jostles his rifle like a baseball bat and smashes the stock into Joel’s jaw.

Crack! With a thick spray of blood, Joel’s head whips back violently and drops limply to his chest.
My hands fly to my mouth, stifling a scream that never comes. I shudder viscerally from the sickening crunch of the blow. Joel folds to the ground and lays on his back with his knees unhinged. Muscles spasmodically straining, he claws at the dirt till his whole body stiffens and he lays unconscious.

The drill sergeant stands over him, glowering. After a long moment, he tries to rouse him. “Wake the fuck up, you stank-ass bitch!”

Joel doesn’t move. He’s out cold. A blow that hard would knock someone out for a week, I think. The drill sergeant leads his rifle muzzle past Joel’s open mouth and rattles it between his macerated lips. Joel slowly rouses. He’s disoriented. He swats away the muzzle with uncoordinated shaky arms.

“Get up,” the drill sergeant says. “Up! Up! Up!”

Reeling and dazed, Joel rolls onto his side and pulls himself stiffly from the ground. He drunkenly swivels his head, winces, and cradles his bloody face. His jaw swells grotesquely. His puffy split lower lip courses blood down his chin, neck, and chest. He looks like hell. He’s probably lost plenty of teeth. His jaw’s probably shattered. He’s going to be in terrible pain for weeks with that split lip alone.

“I figured I broke your damn neck,” the drill sergeant says. “Next time I will. You’re dumber than a brick of shit if you think you can come in here and run things. Think you can do whatever the fuck you want, boy?”

“No, Sir,” Joel says, his voice soft and thick through his swollen jaw and shredded lips.

“No, Sir lying?”

“No, Sir.”

“You’re a damn dishonorable liar! I can’t let you get away with that. Know what we do to damn dishonorable liars?”

“No, Sir.”

“We tenderize them. How do you like that?”

“I dunno.”

“Sir, you dumb brick of shit!”

“I dunno, Sir.”

“Now ain’t that a surprise?” the drill sergeant laughs. “Smile, you goddamn sonofabitch. We’re gonna have some fun!”

Joel doesn’t move nor speak.

The drill sergeant unholsters a pistol from appendix carry, racks a round, and stamps it to Joel’s temple. “Smile or I’ll kill you,” he says, his voice a virile threat.

Joel squints hellishly. He flashes a sinister cold smile through his abominably-swollen jaw. His face is a horror. I’ll never forget this look on his face as long as I live. Ellie, this look says to me, here’s your official welcome to Hell. I done told you, child. This is Hell. You’re living in it.
The drill sergeant pivots and addresses the squad. “You heard The Big Voice! Take off your shoes!”

The prisoners don’t move. Their eyes are hard and angry, and their jaws are tight. I don’t know what they’re in for but they do, and by the look on their faces, it’s nothing good. The drill sergeant gestures to a group of guards. They swarm the rows and shove the prisoners into action.

“Take off your shoes, you goddamn retards! That’s an order! Move! Move! Move!”

Joel clenches and unclenches his fists before sliding off his sneakers. Prisoners remove their shoes and shift their bare feet over the scarred dirt.

“Forward march!” the drill sergeant yells.

Prisoners file into a single column and loop the courtyard perimeter in a stiff slow trot.

“Double time! Move! Move! Move!”

The prisoners jog in broken strides. On the fifteenth lap, the gravel saturates pink. On the twentieth lap, bright red. On the twenty-fifth lap, deep dark crimson. A grey-haired prisoner stagers. An entire flap of skin is ripped open from the ball of his foot to his heel, hanging loose with every step. Too many prisoners drop unconscious to continue. They sprawl the courtyard in wounded heaps, collapsed right where they’d taken their final steps.

“Halt!” the drill sergeant yells. “Fall out!”

The prisoners who’re still standing drop to their knees and crawl toward the gate, their mangled feet trailing bloody pulp.

Joel stands in the center of the courtyard. The last man standing. Equipped with nothing but the strong instinct to hold himself upright and keep moving forward. His laid-open lip pulls his battered swollen face into a crooked broken snarl. Blood flows freely and soaks his whole shirt black.

The back of my neck flushes hot in anger. My heart throbs fury and my eyes tear at watching innocent men suffer in a way I wish to never see again. Claustrophobia throttles, foul and unclean. I have the suffocating realization that no matter how much I refuse to give into Eph’s threats, I’m being pushed along by a greater power. A prowling stalking terror that thrives on reckless irrepressible cruelty. Destruction, degradation, and fury. Man destroys. It’s what he does. Warlike, cruel, and venomous. He massacres beautiful or ugly things. It’s all the same to him as long as he destroys something. He destroys without pity or remorse, whether by his own hands or the hands of others.

My whole body breaks out in a cold sweat. It feels like the air’s been sucked out of the room. I was wrong. I was wrong about everything. Humanity’s fallen. All’s lost. I’m certain of it now. Mankind’s surpassed every imaginable horror. Malignantly ferocious and brutal. The world has little care or want for good kind men deserving of love, liberty, freedom, and brotherhood. Men who are able to recall kind memories and kindly kin. Joel was right. He was right about everything. The just and the unjust are equally condemned to Hell. A cure won’t do this rotten world a bit of good.

Everything I already knew about Joel and everything I just learned converges. It feels like a veil’s been lifted from my eyes, and I can see everything with more clarity and focus than I’ve ever seen in my life.
Joel doesn’t care about causes or whatever warring factions fight over. He sees the world as a dark brutal irreparable place that doesn’t protect anyone or anything, whether you’re good or bad, military or civilian. I can imagine his sense of crushing betrayal once we made it to St. Mary’s. We were duped. We travelled long and hard to get there. We almost died more times than we could remember. We thought at the end of the journey, there’d be peace and victory. A peaceful transition, welcomed with open arms. Welcomed not only as selfless drifters but as the chosen ones bearing the precious gift of humanity. A tale of courage and survival against impossible odds. The Fireflies greeted us with death. What we thought had been a noble cause was inherently wicked.

Joel protects his principles and he doesn’t care about the consequences. He abides by the rules but he’s got an utter disregard for authority and law when it trespasses his sense of justice. He only respects the laws if he finds them just. He only abides by them if his opponent’s governed by the same codes of conduct. He turns lawless when his sense of inequality’s been threatened. He refuses to be stripped of his rights.

By refusing the Fireflies my sacrifice, he did good by doing bad. This world isn’t worth saving. Let it burn itself down and start over. I’d start right here with Providence if I could.

If Joel had told me the truth about what happened with the Fireflies, everything would be different, though I know why he lied to me. I think of the person who I was when we got to Jackson and I wouldn’t have been able to handle it. I wouldn’t have understood. Now I do. Now that it’s too late.

“Blood to wash away every sin,” Eph says. “The word of God upon the hearts of men, cleansed and pardoned by the blood of Christ.” He sits on the edge of his desk and gestures to the floor directly in front of him. “Bring up your chair,” he says. I draw up my chair to where he instructed, and I sit. “There’s still a heap to be told about the Fireflies and St. Mary’s,” he says.

I don’t respond.

“Tomorrow won’t be any easier,” he says. “I can promise you that. It’s plain you wanna live. How much longer depends on how much you tell me.”

“I’m not telling you shit,” I say, my voice firm. “Your job’s to give me and Joel safe passage to St. Mary’s. Not to feed you intel. You’ve got no right risking our lives!”

He continues speaking as if he hadn’t heard me. “Gimme your foot.” He pats his thick thighs.

“What for?” I ask.

“Give it to me,” he says and pats his thigh. “I won’t say it again.”

I draw up my leg and he takes it by the ankle, laying my foot over his thick thigh. It’s a very unpleasant feeling to have his hands on me.

“Before the Critical,” he says, “I was a rancher. In cattle country. I owned a cattle ranch passed down from six generations of hard work. I ran it with my brothers. Ranching’s a numbers game. Get below a certain number and you get mighty lonesome to fill-up them vacancies—cowpunchers and livestock.”

He tugs at my laces and slowly unties them as he speaks. “In my great great great grandfather’s day, ranchers had to deal with rustlers. Drifters who set up small ranches on their land and squatted illegally in the valleys. Running them out was a tricky proposition. Range bosses didn’t wanna interfere so they left it to punchers with good aim and a quick draw. They’d run-off his cattle and burn down his buildings. The law of the range.
“Rustlers didn’t deserve mercy. They were common cattle thieves. They’d fan down, run branding irons on other folks’ cattle and horses, mix them up with their own stock, and sell them to ranchers in crooked deals with forged bills of sale. Calves were big targets. Momma cows would chase down their babes when rustlers ran them off, so the rustlers would rope them first—hogtie them and burn their hooves with their brands. Hobble them.”

He wedges-off my boot, peels-off my sock, and takes my bare foot in his hand. “Now, I’mma ask you one last time and I’mma have an answer or the Dentist’s gonna heat-up an iron till it’s white-hot and tenderize your sweet size sevens. If you still ain’t in the mood to talk, we’ve got plenty of ways of dealing with you that ain’t polite or gentle. Start yapping. St. Mary’s. The Fireflies. How many vehicles do they have? How big’s the armory? Is there a confederacy? Under whose leadership is it now?”

I know what’s coming. A moment of reason returns to me. Just give him what he wants, I tell myself. What’s the big deal? It’s just a stupid floor plan. Give him the intel. Let him and his Providence vagrants go raid St. Mary’s. They’ll find out soon enough they’re up against an unbeatable force. They’ll be slaughtered right where they stand. These thoughts don’t last very long. I feel my muscles gathering-up. I tear my foot from his hand and pull to my feet. I hold my chin high and look at him with contempt in my eyes. “I’ll see you in Hell before I tell you anything,” I say. “I hope you fucking die!”

His face ruptures. He winds back an arm and rockets a fist into my jaw, violently propelling me to the floor. My head cracks sharply on impact. My vision explodes silver. My mouth floods with the taste of metallic and my ears ring. I lay stunned, the room spinning wildly. I curl onto my side and cough weakly, hot blood spurting my nose and coursing my throat.

I feel his cold hobnail boot come down against my head. He’s trying to crush it. He’s trying to crush my head like you’d crush vermin with a rock. I claw at his boot, slobbering blood and slavering spit. Warm blood cascades my split skull, floods my neck, and clouds my eyes. I turn cold, numb, empty, and sleepy. I don’t care. I don’t care about anything at all. Shouts ebb to silence and everything fades to black.
“He’s not supposed to kill you,” a raspy bass-baritone voice says. “He’s not even supposed to partially kill you.”

I come to, laid on my back on a cold stainless-steel table. It takes a while to remember where I am. The last thing I remember was being in Eph’s office with my foot in his lap. A tall grey square man stands over me with white webby hair hanging past his broad shoulders. I know who it is without being told. The Dentist.

“He thinks God’s his only superior,” he says, “walks around like a king and thinks we should hold our breath when his name’s uttered. He thinks he’s a dictator. Sentences prisoners to life or death if he doesn’t like the bend of their nose or the slope of their shoulders.”

Dizzy and reeling, I shut my eyes. Weak, cold, detached, and disoriented. The Dentist leads me onto my side. I brace the edge of the table for support. He shuffles to an industrial tool chest along the far wall and returns with a staple gun. “Want me to grab some of them fellas waiting outside?” he asks. “They’ll hogtie you, keep you from struggling.”

“No,” I say.

“Then you’d better keep still.”

“Just do what you have to do. Do it now and be quick.”

“Don’t move.” He vices my head to the table with one hand, and with the other, he clacks a jagged row of staples along my nape.

I know this should hurt. I know I should be howling and screaming, blacking-out in pain. But I feel nothing over the abject pain in my heart. Sorrow aches my chest with a loss so great, it can’t be grasped. The forfeit of humanity. The blighted fate of mankind.

The Dentist helps me into a sitting position. I can’t focus my eyes. I hunch over my lap. “You and the Fortieth Man are two of a kind,” he says. “You’ve got the same damn will.”

“Where is he?” I ask, my tongue sluggish, and my voice gluey and thick. “You can do whatever you want to me. I’ll do anything you want me to do.”

He laughs. “Your buy-off’s of no value here. Orders come from powers above. No boundaries on the Fortieth Man but we agreed to keep you intact. No wounds, no infections, no fractures, no diseases. I’ll have a word with the Sun King. I can’t promise anything. His word’s useless, even the rare times it’s given.”

I wake early afternoon wishing I were dead. A terrible headache pounds my head. My ears ring...
incessantly. My eyes are bleary and I’ve lost the ability to focus them clearly. My mouth’s parched with fever. Every muscle in my body aches with pain.

I raise a hand to the wound at the back of my head. Warm thick blood oozes freely from it. It saturates my matted hair, and slicks my neck and back in sticky dried crusts. It smells awful. I smell awful. Between the smell and the fever, this is very bad.

I haven’t given death by infection much thought. Man’s born to die. I know this. But what an ignoble way to die. I suppose I’ll die right here in my cell. I’d rather not die closed-up in a prison cell if I had the choice. I don’t want to die in some dark dank slimy corner of a prison cell. I’d rather die in the open. I don’t want to die with the smell of my own filth on myself. I pray I’ll get to a point where I feel sick enough I won’t care how I die. I guess when I’m closer to death, I won’t care. But right now, I care.

Earlier this morning, I woke to a guard planted in my cell door. My blood iced, fearing what was to come, but what came was a bunk. Two guards carried it in. A steel single bunk with a thin vinyl mattress. I was told to sit on it, so I sat, and I was given the newest terms. My cell door will be kept open from morning drills to lights out. I’m permitted to walk around the common areas and I’m permitted to use the communal guard bathroom.

Before the guard left, he looked at me with blazing eyes and delivered a couple threats. “Don’t be too curious,” he said. “Mind your own fucking business. Don’t talk to anyone. Don’t ask any questions. Keep your fucking mouth shut. Don’t wander. Don’t go too far. Don’t bother trying to escape—punishment’s a bullet.”

I brace my bunk and pull to my feet, crying out in pain. Cold sweat bristles my upper lip. The coppery taste of fever coats my mouth. I know I’m not well. No one needs to tell me this. Lightheaded and trembling, I wander the halls till I come to the central stairwell. I stop on the landing and look through the windows overlooking the campus. In a far corner, I spot the concrete-slab dog kennels past brick row-garages with a small fleet of pick-up trucks. Across the lawn is a two-story brick dormitory with a dozen mixed-age women squatting on the front steps, chatting and smoking. Some string laundry over saggy lines, and some sit on a shady patch of grass, grooming each other’s hair. I don’t see any children, which means these women are here for housekeeping and comfort. Nothing else. Beyond the women’s dorm, two dozen prisoners rake the grass, overseen by guards. They work in slow-moving clots, their necks encircled by the separate loops of a single rope.

I’m pleased to be allowed out of my cell. I’m pleased to get away from the bad smells of the hallway. The smells of the other prisoners. But the feeling is fleeing. I suppose I’ve been allowed to wander the building because there’s no escape. Even if I weren’t wounded, the grounds are too well-patrolled and protected. There’s only death here. I’m probably going to die here. Joel, too.

I pull away from the windows and peer over the banister into the foyer where a prisoner mops the hardwood floors. He’s black, and built of average height and body type. There’s nothing remarkable about him at all. A group of guards cuts through the hall, stomping dirty boot prints across the wet floors.

“First Man!” a guard yells at the prisoner. “You missed a spot.”

The prisoner doesn’t respond and continues mopping like he hadn’t heard a thing. After the guards exit, he brandishes his mop like a long sword and slices it theatrically through the air. “My name’s Bishop!” he yells. “And don’t you forget it!” He smiles broadly to himself.
My eyes widen at that smile. I’ve seen that smile before. It comes to me right away. The fire tower. Sacred Way. My heart skips a beat. It’s him! Bishop! An older wearier leaner version of the man I saw in the photograph! I’m sure of it. That’s where I knew his name. When he smiled, it was the same smile from the portrait.

Before I can think about this, a big hand closes around my arm, which belongs to a tall hawk-nosed guard. He tears me from the banister and shoves me into the wall. He squares in front of me and readjusts an eight-point cover over his greasy hair. “Just looking around?” he asks with a dazed smile.

“Just looking around,” I say.

“Seen anything you like?” he asks.

“No.”

“Seems like you were getting an eyeful.”

“I was...thinking.”

“Thinking about something special? Eggs?”

“Eggs?” I ask.

“I’ll give you one. Tonight. When the whores come. No one’ll know.”

“No one’ll know what?”

“My dick wants to fall in love with your mouth.” He fondles himself through his 5.11s. “I’mma pound my meat between those sweet lips. Lemme see how deep that throat is.” He reaches toward my face. I slip out of his reach before he can grab me. Fuck off, asshole, I want to yell at him, but I don’t. I don’t want to risk jeopardizing my new privileges so I keep my mouth shut and walk back to my cell.

I rest on my bunk till the dinner ration arrives. It looks like cabbage boiled with something unpleasant. Cabbage can be boiled with anything, really. Blood of an animal. Weeds and roots. Roasted leaves. It doesn’t matter what it’s been boiled with because I’m not eating it.

I go to dump it into my waste bucket and I stop myself. I think of what Joel said in the pick-up. You must survive. I sigh deep. I should eat anything they give me, shouldn’t I? I pinch my nose and tip the bowl to my mouth. I do this for Joel. I eat without chewing and let it slide down my throat. It doesn’t matter what it’s been boiled with because I’m not eating it.

I sit on my bunk, willing myself to keep it down. I hear something strange. I pause and listen. The sound comes again—garish female voices coming from the command post. In my head, I picture the same rough women I saw from the foyer windows. Who else could it be? I have to go see for myself.

I get to the command post and it’s exactly as I’d imagined. The rough women I saw from the windows flirting with the guards. They wear short thin cotton dresses and ground-down heels.

“Hey!” a scowling guard yells at me. A chubby girl sits on his lap, rough-haired and open-mouthed. “Go back to your cell, you dirty little cunt!”
“I need the bathroom,” I say.

“Lights out.”

“Not for another hour.”

“Shitter’s closed.”

“It’s an emergency.”

“You’ve gotta bucket. Use it!”

I don’t move nor speak.

He swings-up his assault rifle in warning. “I’llma grip you up and shove my dick in you if you don’t turn around right now!”

I head back to my cell. I’ll have to pass the prisoners’ cell on the way. Joel’s not in there. He would’ve already made himself known to me if he was in there. I’d know it without a doubt. I suppose he’s being kept in a private cell in a different wing. I intend to find out. Right now, in fact. The conditions are perfect with the guards distracted by the whores. I’ll ask around for Bishop. I intend to deliver my message to him like I promised.

I approach the prisoners’ cell and someone’s standing in the door, watching me. A short stocky black man with yellow-stained eyes. I look past him into the cell. Dozens of prisoners rest on the floor, most laid on vinyl mattresses. These are the same men whose voices I hear at night and who I watched from Eph’s windows. Their faces are blank and hopeless. Their eyes reflect silent torment. Blue and red welts, and oozing black ulcers cover their limbs. Bloody rags bind their swollen feet. It looks more like a triage than a prison cell. I don’t see Joel. He’s not in here. Part of me is glad he’s not among these suffering men.

“Child,” the man in the doorway says. “Where are you going and where are you from?”

I don’t respond.

“Speak up, child,” he says. “You’re among friends.”

“My name’s Ellie. Ellie Williams. Who’re you?”

He thinks about this for a moment. “Joe White. I dunno if that’s my name or not but it’s easy to remember and it sounds good. Where are you from?”

“Boston.”

“Boston?” he asks, incredulous.

“I’ve been around.”

“Where about?”

“Wyoming Territory. Dakota Territories.”

“What’s your business here?”

“I’m looking for someone. A man named Bishop.”
“What do you want with the First Man?” he asks.

“I have something to tell him.”

He scans the back wall. “Bishop! The child’s asking for you.”

The black man from the Sacred Way photograph comes to the door. His eyes are shifty and guarded. The child murdered that day looked just like him. He’s the father of that child. I’m sure of it.

“Speak up, child,” he says, “or stop wasting my time.”

“Is your name Bishop?” I ask.

“That’s what they call me.”

“Are you from Wyoming Territory? Did you live in a fire tower on a wooded hill called Sacred Way?”

His eyes flash a mix of suspicion, disbelief, and fear. “What the hell business is it of yours?”

“My name’s Ellie Williams. I was drifting from Wyoming Territory to North Dakota Territory with a man named Joel Miller. He’s here, too. He’s the one who killed the dogs. We saw your fire tower. We were there. There was a photo of you on a boat with a woman.”

His lips part to speak. His mouth works silently and he stutters incoherently. “Aliyah! My wife!”

I clutch the steel bars of the door, holding them tight. “There was an incident.”

His chest spasms and his eyes stare blindly, shifting in tight bursts, taking it all in.

“She lost her life,” I say. “I wanted you to know.”

“No. It can’t be. It can’t be.”

“We saw it happen. She was talking about you when she died. We dug them a grave below the fire tower, in the shade.”

“They?” He winces.

“There was a child. Jack?”

His eyes drift away and reconnect desperately. “Jackson? A boy? We had a boy? We had a boy!” He smiles wide, his face ecstatic and joyous. But it’s only fleeting. A visceral chill comes over his body. He buries his head into his hands and weeps softly.

Prisoners gather around him and lay their hands over him. Some stare at me with grave eyes. I don’t blame them. Who’s this witch, they must be thinking. What kind of wicked witch comes and tells a man his wife and child are dead? What kind of person would do this? I don’t like doing this but I had to tell him. I made a promise. I don’t regret telling him this horrible thing. Now he knows.

He looks at me with a million questions in his eyes. His cheeks are wet with tears and his lips are slicked in slobber. “The twins?” he asks. “Rae ‘n’ Imani?”

“They got out alive,” I say.
He exhales one long shuddering breath and wipes his face with his sleeve. His eyes beg me for details so I tell him the details. “It was maybe two months ago. We killed the outlanders who came for them. There were three of them. We saw the boy and girl running into the woods together. Maybe they’re dead since but we saw them running.”

“If they were running, they ain’t dead,” he says with great conviction.

“We got to your wife before she died. She told me to find you and tell you something. Find Bishop, she said. She wanted me to tell you—Rae and Imani, plan B, the blackballer, and antelope—if that means anything to you.”

He grapples for my hands through the steel bars and squeezes them tight. “God in Heaven,” he says. “Bless you, child. Bless you.” He kisses my fingers with his wet lips and weeps quietly, his face pressed against my knuckles.
Chapter Twenty-Nine

Next Friday night, the whores come again in the hour before lights out. Bless these whores. Last Friday, I noticed the guards completely halted their rounds once the whores showed-up. I don’t see why tonight would be any different, so I go to the men’s cell and I find Bishop already waiting for me in the doorway.

“What’s doing?” he asks as I come into earshot.

I won’t share my troubles and fears with him. I won’t tell him that the wound on the back of my head continues to weep pus, that I run a low-grade fever every night, and that the taste of fever’s in my mouth and on my breath. I’m not well. I know this. My whole head’s swollen and sweaty. My wounds have never been washed or redressed. It’s just a matter of time till sepsis sets in. What else can be done? I’m resigned to my fate.

I’d like to see Joel one last time before I die. If he dies, I’d die, too. The end of him would be like the light going out of the sun. What else do I have left in the world but him? As long as I’m alive, I’m going to do everything I can to keep him alive, too.

I hand Bishop a grey potato and a boiled radish through the bars, just like I’ve done every night this past week. He’ll give my leftovers to the right men. Some of them need it more than me.

“How are your feet?” I ask.

“Don’t you worry. I’m alive. I live and I fight another day. Everything else’s bullshit. Tenderizing and bullfighting ain’t shit.”

“There’s worse?”

He laughs sardonically. “Beat down day. Decimation. Removal of the tenth. The nine below him get sticks, rocks—whatever they’ve got on hand—and beat him down till he’s dead. Once you’re the tenth man, you start thinking of some mighty bad ways to shuffle the deck. There’s a small voice inside you that makes you glad it’s not you. It’s not how you wanna feel, or how any man’s supposed to feel, but it’s how you feel. When it’s your turn, it’s your turn. We don’t even merit a bullet. They throw you in the pit. If you manage to crawl out, you die of exhaustion, thirst, hunger, infection, disease—whatever. They treat beasts in a field better.”

I feel my cheeks flushing in anger. He must notice because he diplomatically changes the subject. He gestures at my wounded face and asks, “The Dentist?”

“Eph,” I say.

“He’s a bad loser. He plays a mean game and he plays every game to win.”

“How’d you end-up here?”

“Same story as all them brothers. False charges.”

“For what?”
“Disturbing the peace. Exposing corruption. Tyranny.”

“You’re a political prisoner?”

“We all took a stand.”

“Against what?”

“Anyone with power. It was one of those days too nice to imagine any evil exists in this world. I went down to the creek to catch some fish. On the way back, I cut across a field and came across some of them New Millenniums. One was standing on a milk crate, wilding-out. I wasn’t there to listen. I was there to trade my catch with some of the men. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was a decoy.

“These big goons came outta the bushes and started beating us down. They grabbed as many as they could. Someone hit me with a police baton so I took it from him and beat him back. That’s why I’m here. That’s why a lot of us are here. I didn’t do nothing wrong but stop to barter some fish and listen to a Bible-thumper on a podium. I was just a bystander who was on his way home to feed his family. I was beaten and I fought back.”

This is a bad story but it’s a stupid mistake to make. It could’ve been avoided. He should’ve never gathered like that. It felt like a trap because it was. Even I know this. In the QZs there were strict laws about men gathering. Gathering in groups was illegal. Even if it wasn’t, no one did it because it was so reckless, like putting a target on your back. Now he knows.

“Why do they call you Bishop?” I ask.

“’Cause that’s my name! John Henry Bishop. Know the tale?”

I shake my head, no.

“My folks named me after the Steel-Driving Man. John Henry. Born with a hammer in his hand. A brother of legendary strength and speed, he built the Big Bend Tunnel with the blood, sweat, and tears of his emancipated black brothers. Free men. They dug rail beds, drilled and blasted tunnels, raised bridges, and laid tracks. John Henry drove the drills deep with a ten-pound hammer in his hand. Blasted the mountains with dynamite and pulverized them to dust. One day, the boss showed-up with a steam-powered drill looking to replace all them proud strong steel drivers. John Henry challenged the machine to a fight, said if he couldn’t beat a machine, he’d die with his hammer in his hand.”

“Did he die?” I ask.

“Did he die?” he laughs like it’s the craziest thing he’s ever heard. He smiles and sings a sort of folk song in a pleasant rich baritone.

♫Take this hammer, carry it to the Captain, tell him I’m going home. I don’t want your cold iron shackles around my leg.♫

We share a warm smile. I feel like I’ve already known him for a long time. Something told me deep in my gut that day at Sacred Way to give the mother and child a proper burial. I’m glad I listened. I’m glad Joel listened. He must’ve felt something deep in his gut, too.

“What do they make you do here?” I ask.

“Men who work, work,” he says. “Latrines, grounds, kennels, garages, and dorms. We make
brooms, sweep, and scrub. Do the cleaning and the hauling, grub wood, and drag it to the cookhouse. Shovel coal, lay bricks, mix cement, and dig ditches. Clean-up their shit.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Long enough to lose count of all the men I’ve seen murdered and the suicides I’ve witnessed. I’m the First Man.”

“Who’s the last?”

“The Fortieth Man. The Texas Cowpuncher.”

My heart skips a beat. “Joel,” I say.

“Are you his child?” he asks.

“Where is he?” I ask.

“In the Hole, eating rats. Been there since the Brickyard.”

“The Dentist’s new best friend!” a voice yells from the cell rear.

“The Mule Whacker!” another yells.

“The Silent Man,” a voice yells.

“Fuck that little bitch man,” a voice says from the back of the cell. “No one cares about his life.”

Bishop glares hard in the direction of the voice and says, “I wouldn’t say that again if I were you, Sledge.”

“Are you calling me out?” Sledge asks.

“I ain’t calling no one out. I’m saying you’d better not be running down the Fortieth Man to no one.”

“And why not?” Sledge asks.

“Because I’m telling you and I ain’t telling you again. If a man’s fighting at my side, I don’t care who he is or what he does. Go find yourself, son.”

“And we’ve been eating some mighty tasty Pit Bull stew this week,” a voice laughs.

The prisoners laugh.

Bishop addresses me. “Solitary confinement. A pitch-black hole in the ground. Not even enough room to lie down. No sleep, no rest.”

“He’s tough,” I say.

“ Doesn’t matter how tough you think you are. That place’ll make you put your faith in prayer or profanity. He’s either praying or cursing.”

“He doesn’t curse.”

“Then he’s praying,” he laughs.
“How do I find him?”

“How do I find him?” he says, his manner turning cold, hard, and impassable. “Death’s down there.”

“Wherever he goes, I go.”

“Don’t go looking for death, child! It’ll come find you soon enough!”

“They’ll beat him!”

“They’ll beat him!”

“Not to death,” he says.

“He’s a wanted man. There’s a bounty on his head.”

“If they wanna collect on the bounty, they’ll keep him alive enough to be able to speak.”

“They’ll keep beating him!”

“Move on and say less!” he yells, his voice edged in command.

I drop my eyes.

“Tell me about outside,” he says. “Being here, the world’s completely passed us by. I’ll bet you’ve seen a lotta country out there.”

“I’ve seen my share,” I say.

“What’s the news?”

“Nothing.”

“It’s still bad out there?” he asks.

“Death’s out there.”

“Was it bad for you?”

“It’s bad for everyone. Everyone’s dying. Ambushes, executions, hangings, disease, infection.”

“Where were you at?”

“Wyoming Territory, Nebraska Territory, the Dakota Territories.”

“You didn’t happen to see two brothers around Bighorn drifting together, did you? They look just like me but uglier and taller. Ugly as sin. I left them notes everywhere.”

“I saw some notes,” I say.

“My notes?” His eyes brighten.

“Others. They’re everywhere.”

“Remember any of them?”

“All of them.”

“Gimme some names!”
I summon the pleas for the lost, the dead, and the disappeared, inscribed to my memory. “Know someone named David Ray Sherman from Leadore, Idaho Territory?”

His whole face lights up. “Dewey? How do you know Dewey?”

“He’s dead. Died last week.” He shakes his head, no. “Sergeant tried to pry-off his jaw with a machine-gun, turned green a week later. They dragged him to the Brickyard and stabbed him. He died, shouting defiantly through a mass of gangrene. Crazy as fuck. Life staggers on. Who else?”

“Jeremiah Michael Brown from Poplar, Montana Territory?”

“Never been a brother here with that name.”

“Andrew Mason Simpson? From Plainview, Nebraska Territory?”

“A large black man with a crooked snub nose rises stiffly from a ripped mattress and shuffles toward us, his patchy black beard flecked with something wet. Spittle or blood. Bloody spittle, I suppose. The other men start to gather around the door, eager to hear what I have to say.

“The child’s got something to say to you,” Bishop says.

“What do you want?” Sippy asks me.

“Are you Andrew Mason Simpson?” I ask him.

He tilts his head inquisitively, his hard eyes guarded below yellow bandages, wet with crusty pus.

“That’s what they called me.”

“From Plainview, Nebraska Territory?”

“Out with it, child.”

“I found a note to you from Catherine Nina Simpson.”

His eyes widen in amazement and his lips work soundlessly. “Cat,” he whispers. “Call her Cat. She didn’t go by Catherine unless she was in big trouble with her momma and daddy, and the Lord knows it was bad when they used Nina.” He laughs nervously, his whole face warming with the memory.

“‘It’s early spring, 20 and 34,’” I say, reciting the note from memory. “‘I’m with Momma. She’s safe but you know how she is. If you’re with Daddy, tell him we’re alive and we love him.’”

Sippy squeezes his eyes shut and silent tears spill his cheeks.

“‘We went back home and waited two weeks,’” I say. “‘No one came. Don’t bother going back. Ferals burned it all down. Nothing’s left. We’re at the Episcopal Church, the old St. George Port. Come find us here, come as soon as you can. We’re waiting for you and Daddy. We’re not leaving until you both come or until we hear from you. I love you. Momma loves you, too. May God keep you safe. May God keep Daddy safe.’”

Eyes wet, red, and swollen, Sippy shuffles to his mattress with his knuckles pressed to his mouth.
“Goddamn,” Bishop says to me, his eyes full of wonder. “You’re in your own lane now.”

“Do you know someone called Dan Lee Hutchings? From Manson, Iowa Territory?”

Bishop’s eyes widen again. “Hutch!”

A short stocky red-headed man hobbles to the front, the crowd of men parting to let him pass. A thick red scar runs through his patchy red beard. It draws up the corner of his mouth into a crooked permanent smile. Scarred bumpy flesh erupts where his ears should’ve been.

“Listen to this!” Bishop yells at him. “Just listen to this!” He turns to me and urges me to speak. “Go on, tell him!”

“Are you Dan Lee Hutchings from Manson, Iowa Territory?”

He nods his head, yes, his trembling hands lacing and unlacing.

“I found a note from Taylor Joy Hutchings, dated from this year.”

“What year’s this?” he asks.

I don’t know if he’s making a statement or if he really doesn’t know what year it is, so I tell him—20 and 34—and I continue.

“God willing this message will find you. I tried to find you back in Shellsburg in early May. I got deported to Cedar Rapids QZ, M Block on Hamilton Avenue. It’s 20 and 34, early summer. Sean and Andy are here, keeping-up my spirits. Your mom’s here, too, but she’s ill and heartbroken. She wants to see you bad. I pray every day we’ll be together. I wanna find you more than anything else in this world. I won’t stop praying till we’re safe in each other’s arms. I dream of our future together every time I close my eyes. There are so many things I need to tell you but I’m gonna wait until I see you, which I pray will be soon. I hope you can forgive me for everything. Please come find us here. I love you.”

Hutch sinks to his knees and buries his head into his hands. “Is she dead?” he asks, his voice tight and marred in tears.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I’m sorry.”

“I know she’s dead. God have mercy on her soul. God be with her.” Men pull him to his feet and lead him away.

“That’s some real talk,” Bishop says. “Who else?”

Who else? No one else. When I came across these notes it was just a game. A diversion. I suppose it’s like how people watched television or went to the movies. To see the lives of others. At the end of the movie, you forgot about it and went on with your own life, which is what I did. But now I realize these people are real, with real loved ones and real families who they’ll probably never see again. Why should I be the one to give them the bad news? Why should I be the messenger of heartbreak, displacement, and loss? “No more,” I say. “I can’t remember anymore.”

“You can’t stop now, Ellie!” he yells.

I swallow my tears. “He’s right. They’re probably all dead. What’s the point?”

“Dead or alive, it’s still news to us. Your message from Aliyah? Plan B? It’s our backup. Antelope
Island on the Great Salt Lake. Our cruiser’s moored out there. The Black Baller. The one from the photo. My kids are there, waiting for their dad.” He steadies his chin and hastily wipes an errant tear. “We live through this hell, you’re coming with me to meet them proper. They’re gonna wanna thank you.”

Overwhelmed by grief, I turn from the door and take a couple steps away, my heart throbbing.

“Ellie, please!” he yells after me. “That ache you feel right now? We feel that same exact ache a hundred times a day. Your heart fills with so much sorrow you wonder how it can hold any more, wondering if your loved ones are gone or dead. Or maybe they’ve forgotten about you, stopped caring about you. You get to a point—crazy with grief—that you pray they’re dead, pray they’ve been spared all those imagined horrors.

“We all have dreams—all of us—and we’ve been living on them for years. The end of this, going back home, reuniting with our families, and going back to the old familiar things with the folks we love. They’re small things but it’s all we’ve got. Please don’t take away our hope.”

I think about this for a moment. He’s right. I’ve dwelt on my own hardships for too long. I was indifferent to the suffering of others. At least I know where Joel is and I know he’s still alive. I wipe away my tears and go back to the door.

“You’re a champ!” he laughs. “You’re all these sons’ champ!”

“Do you know someone named Amos Sanderson, Jr. from Long Hills, Oklahoma Territory?” I ask.

“Sandy!” he yells. A moment later, he shakes his head, no. “Sandy’s gone. He’s dead.”

“How about Beau Jett ‘BJ’ Buchanan? From Dupree, South Dakota Territory?”

Bishop laughs and scans the men’s faces. “Beau Jett from Dupree. Ain’t that your born name, Yellow Dog?”

An emaciated wraith-like man with grey brittle hair and bruised eyes sunk in a large square head stumbles forward. “I’m BJ, ma’am,” he says with a shy smile. He holds up an oversized chapped hand hanging from a thin arm. The skin across his bare chest is wrinkled from wasted-away muscle. “Born and raised in Dupree.”

“Why do they call you Yellow Dog?” I ask.

“Beau Jett Buchanan’s too heavy of a name to go carrying around. Back on our farm we had a whole mess of mutts—shaggy mongrels and ugly-headed hounds. They were yellow dogs—a German Shepherd’s body with a Bulldog’s head. This little body of mine never matched this big old head.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, thinking about the message I have to tell him. It was written in blood but I don’t need to tell him this. It won’t change anything.

“Well, I reckon it was just a notion,” he says with a shy smile, unaware of what I’m about to tell him. “Folks get mighty strange ones.”

“I found a message from your brother.”

His smile evaporates, his cheeks whiten, and his eyes shift. He must’ve felt something bad in his gut.
“There was no date,” I say. “I don’t know when it was from. It said, ‘if you’re reading this, it means Cody’s still alive and got this out. We never gave up hope of finding you. We looked for you every day. Whatever happened, I know you’re still alive. You were always a fighter. I don’t have long—I got bit. Cody’s gonna help me. He’s gonna bury me in Momma’s grave, right by her side. It’s hard to die so young. There’s so much more I wanted to do. Goodbye, Bucky. You know I gave up on the notion of God and Heaven a long time ago but I pray it exists so I can see you again. I know we will. This is so goddamn tough. I love you, brother. Till we see each other again.’”

Yellow Dog wails, his face fractured in grief. Bishop pulls him into a hug and looks at me over his shoulders. “We fools have been praying every day,” he says. “It’s all we’ve got left. We thought God’s mercy was turned from us, that we’d been fixed for death. But He’s been listening to us. He sent us an angel, sent you to earth to defend us from the Devil.”

I shake my head, no. “I don’t believe in God. I don’t believe in Heaven or the Devil.”

“That doesn’t matter,” he says. “An angel’s just a messenger.”

“A messenger of heartache.”

“No. Angels bear our burdens, carry us when we’re too tired to take another step, the servants of the heirs of Salvation—the furthest place from this Hell.” He glares around the cell with a look of deep contempt. “Though I reckon Hell would be a mighty fine place after Providence.”
Chapter Thirty

I lid-up from a dead sleep, overwhelmed by an alarming sense of panic. I hear Joel’s voice deep in my gut, as clearly as I heard him that last night at Jackson. 

*Stay down, stay quiet, stay alert.*

Eyes wide around the darkness, I rise from my bunk, slip into my boots, and lace them tight. I stand moored to the spot, paralyzed by an overwhelming sense of dread. Something rustles against the outside wall. My blood ices and my limbs tremble. A cold sweat breaks-out all over my face. I press my ear to the wall.

After a long moment, I hear the muffled far-off detonation of an explosion. I picture it coming from the front gates. After a long silent minute, double explosions sound louder and closer. Assault rifle salvo coughs across the distance followed by an interminable stretch of silence.

Boom! An explosion trembles the ground beneath my feet, coming from inside the building. Blood rushes my ears. Deafening submachine gun airbursts ricochet and duel, faintly strobing the dark hallway beyond my cell. I crouch behind my bunk and peer over the mattress into the hallway, terrified of what’s coming. Either military or a fifth column, both lethal. I’m as good as dead. They’ll assume I’m a prisoner and surely kill me. Part of me thinks this might be for the best. A swift easy death. I pray it comes quick.

From the direction of the command post, rounds cycle and spent brass tinkers across the floor. I hear the sound of a heavy blow and a struggle. A low moan. A shallow cough trails into a gurgle and repeats at short intervals. Boom! An explosion stabs the darkness and concusses the air outside my cell. Crumbled plaster ricochets across the floor. I keep my eyes glued to the door, my mouth bone dry. My blood ices. A big black bulk rises from the shadows. I pray my death comes quick. I don’t want to suffer.

The lock clunks and my cell’s swarmed by half-a-dozen enormous silent men. I can see the faint outlines of their bodies blurring against the darkness. My bunk scrapes across the floor and slides away. Gloved hands grab me and pull me to my feet. I’m too terrified to make a sound, practically pissing myself. A rag is stuffed between my lips and ripping splits apart the air. A thick strip of tape covers my mouth. My arms are drawn behind my back and bound with handcuffs.

An enormous man swings me over his shoulder and holds me to his chest. He strides into the hallway and heads for the stairs. We’re joined by a small flanking division of big men with polished assault rifles. They move silently and communicate in semaphore, their hair clipped high and tight under slim-profile ballistic helmets. Their professional manner and upmarket load-out carries all the markings of the military but I don’t think they’re military.

Down the central staircase, I smell burnt ash and scorched earth. I smell something else. Something that excites me. The smell of horses. We cross through the foyer, the floor littered with cartridge casings, spent shotshells, broken glass, and massacred Providence guards. Outside, dead guards lay sprawled over bloody puddles cast black in silvery moonshine. What kind of faction would plan such a sophisticated coordinated stealth mission under a full moon, I think to myself. Not a very smart one. They’d do it during a new moon when no shadows would give them away. They’d blacken their faces and skin just to be sure, too. It can’t be military. It can’t be.
I’m slid to the ground in front of half-a-dozen tacked-up horses, strong and noble, their nostrils smoking in the midnight mist. I look around, trying to make sense of everything. My eye’s drawn to a group of tacked-up horses across the way. Strong tall Thoroughbreds. A handful of soldiers surround a man. It must be someone important to be flanked by so many soldiers. My heart skips a beat. God in Heaven. It’s Joel.

Joel, I yell at him, screaming his name into my gag with every bone in my body. No sound comes out of my mouth. It’s impossible, bound with tape. He wears a dark scarf drawn over his nose and mouth. His wounds must be very, very bad. His arms are bound behind his back. Our eyes connect and we stare at each other across the way. His chest heaves. Tears freely spill my cheeks. My chest aches with the emptiness of impending departure and separation. I’m afraid this is the last moment we’ll see each other alive. I don’t dare anticipate what’s to become of us. I stop thinking about these things abruptly because I swear I hear him speaking to me. How’s it even possible? I know it’s not possible. He’s unable to speak with his broken jaw. Even if he were able to speak, he’s too far away for me to hear him. But I hear his voice. I hear him clear as if he were speaking right into my ear. Don’t you worry about me, Ellie, he says. Don’t you even waste a single breath worrying about me. We’ll find each other, we will. We’ll see each other again, we will. This won’t be the last of us. He said that. I heard him say this to me as if he were standing right next to me.

I’m ripped from my feet and carried toward a Dutch Warmblood mounted by a tall broad-shouldered woman. She wears dark britches tucked into tall field-riding boots clipped into sterling stirrups. A horse woman. She stares at me fixedly down the Warmblood’s high withers with calm, serene, dispassionate eyes. “Bag them,” she says in a husky mezzo voice. She draws a scarlet scarf across her mouth and nose with a gloved hand.

Everything goes dark as a canvas hood is dropped over my head. A loose loop cinches around my neck. Strong hands lift me from the ground and hoist me toward the mass, heat, and gaminess of a horse. My body’s settled into a deep saddle. Whoever’s mounted behind me draws me back into them—broad, tall, and muscular. A rawhide rope’s tied around my waist and I’m lashed to the pommel.

“Mount and ride!” a voice yells behind me. It’s the woman’s voice. I’m riding two-up with her. She applies her spurs and the horse flies into a throttled gallop, its hooves ripping-up the earth. Wind batters the canvas hood into my face, wet with tears.

“Sit back and relax, little one!” she yells. We sway with the horse’s wild rattling cadence, the flanking cavalry thundering the ground at our sides. “The situation’s under control. You’re now enjoying the protection of the Fireflies!”

Driven away from all that’s familiar by beating hooves and jangling spurs, I enter the next world blind, lashed to a sweaty horse, my knees gripped to the leather saddle, my hips grinding the pommel horn, and my mouth stuffed with linen.

END OF BIG DRIFT

ACT II OF THE GREAT BEYOND

BY ELSIE GLASS
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