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What Will You Read Next?

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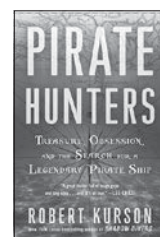
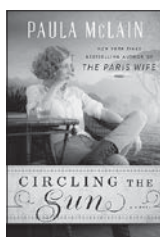
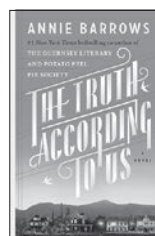
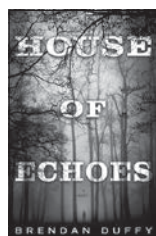
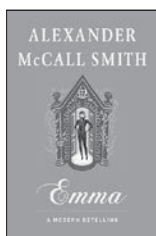
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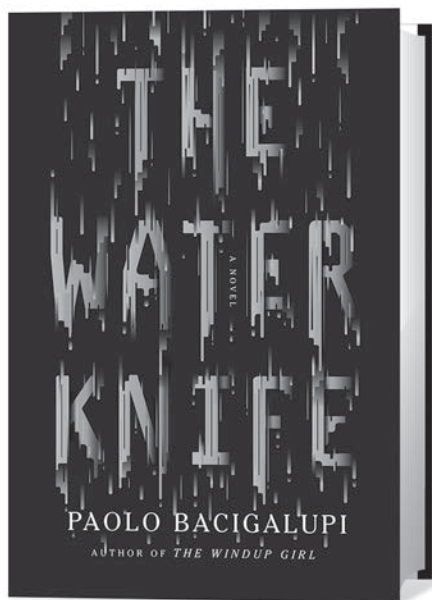
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In the American Southwest, Nevada, Arizona, and California skirmish for dwindling shares of the Colorado River. Into the fray steps Angel Velasquez, detective, leg-breaker, assassin, and spy. A Las Vegas water knife, Angel “cuts” water for his boss, Catherine Case, ensuring that her lush, luxurious arcology developments can bloom in the desert, so the rich can stay wet, while the poor get nothing but dust. When rumors of a game-changing water source surface in drought-ravaged Phoenix, Angel is sent to investigate.

But when water is more valuable than gold, alliances shift like sand, and the only thing for certain is that someone will have to bleed if anyone hopes to drink.

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CHAPTER 1

There were stories in sweat.

The sweat of a woman bent double in an onion field, working fourteen hours under the hot sun, was different from the sweat of a man as he approached a checkpoint in Mexico, praying to La Santa Muerte that the *federales* weren't on the payroll of the enemies he was fleeing. The sweat of a ten-year-old boy staring into the barrel of a SIG Sauer was different from the sweat of a woman struggling across the desert and praying to the Virgin that a water cache was going to turn out to be exactly where her coyote's map told her it would be.

Sweat was a body's history, compressed into jewels, beaded on the brow, staining shirts with salt. It told you everything about how a person had ended up in the right place at the wrong time, and whether they would survive another day.

To Angel Velasquez, perched high above Cypress 1's central bore and watching Charles Braxton as he lumbered up the Cascade Trail, the sweat on a lawyer's brow said that some people weren't near as important as they liked to think.

Braxton might strut in his offices and scream at his secretaries. He might stalk courtrooms like an ax murderer hunting new victims. But no matter how much swagger the lawyer carried, at the end of the day Catherine Case owned his ass—and when Catherine Case told you to get something done quick, you didn't just run, *pendejo*, you ran until your heart gave out and there wasn't no running left.

Braxton ducked under ferns and stumbled past banyan climbing vines, following the slow rise of the trail as it wound around the cooling bore. He shoved through groups of tourists posing for selfies before the braided waterfalls and hanging gardens that spilled down

the arcology's levels. He kept on, flushed and dogged. Joggers zipped past him in shorts and tank tops, their ears flooded with music and the thud of their healthy hearts.

You could learn a lot from a man's sweat.

Braxton's sweat meant he still had fear. And to Angel, that meant he was still reliable.

Braxton spied Angel perched on the bridge where it arced across the wide expanse of the central bore. He waved tiredly, motioning Angel to come down and join him. Angel waved back from above, smiling, pretending not to understand.

"Come down!" Braxton called up.

Angel smiled and waved again.

The lawyer slumped, defeated, and set himself to the final assault on Angel's aerie.

Angel leaned against the rail, enjoying the view. Sunlight filtered down from above, dappling bamboo and rain trees, illuminating tropical birds and casting pocket-mirror flashes on mossy koi ponds.

Far below, people were smaller than ants. Not really people at all, more just the shapes of tourists and residents and casino workers, as in the biotects' development models of Cypress 1: scale-model people sipping scale-model lattes on scale-model coffee shop terraces. Scale-model kids chasing butterflies on the nature trails, while scale-model gamblers split and doubled down at the scale-model blackjack tables in the deep grottoes of the casinos.

Braxton came lumbering onto the bridge. "Why didn't you come down?" he gasped. "I told you to come down." He dropped his briefcase on the boards and sagged against the rail.

"What you got for me?" Angel asked.

"Papers," Braxton wheezed. "Carver City. We just got the judge's decision." He waved an exhausted hand at the briefcase. "We crushed them."

"And?"

Braxton tried to say more but couldn't get the words out. His face was puffy and flushed. Angel wondered if he was about to have a heart attack, then tried to decide how much he would care if he did.

The first time Angel met Braxton had been in the lawyer's offices

in the headquarters of the Southern Nevada Water Authority. The man had a floor-to-ceiling view of Carson Creek, Cypress 1's fly-fishing river, where it cascaded through various levels of the arcology before being pumped back to the top of the system to run through a new cleaning cycle. A big expensive overlook onto rainbow trout and water infrastructure, and a good reminder of why Braxton filed his lawsuits on SNWA's behalf.

Braxton had been lording over his three assistants—all coincidentally svelte girls hooked straight from law school with promises of permanent residence permits in Cypress—and he'd talked to Angel like an afterthought. Just another one of Catherine Case's pit bulls that he tolerated for as long as Angel kept leaving other, bigger dogs dead in his wake.

Angel, in turn, had spent the meeting trying to figure out how a man like Braxton had gotten so large. People outside Cypress didn't fatten up like Braxton did. In all Angel's early life, he'd never seen a creature quite like Braxton, and he found himself fascinated, admiring the fleshy raiment of a man who knew himself secure.

If the end of the world came like Catherine Case said it would, Angel thought Braxton would make good eating. And that in turn made it easier to let the Ivy League *pendejo* live when he wrinkled his nose at Angel's gang tattoos and the knife scar that scored his face and throat.

Times they do change, Angel thought as he watched the sweat drip from Braxton's nose.

"Carver City lost on appeal," Braxton gasped finally. "Judges were going to rule this morning, but we got the courtrooms double-booked. Got the whole ruling delayed until end of business. Carver City will be running like crazy to file a new appeal." He picked up his briefcase and popped it open. "They aren't going to make it."

He handed over a sheaf of laser-hologrammed documents. "These are your injunctions. You've got until the courts open tomorrow to enforce our legal rights. Once Carver City files an appeal, it's a different story. Then you're looking at civil liabilities, minimally. But until courts open tomorrow, you're just defending the private property rights of the citizens of the great state of Nevada."

Angel started going through the documents. “This all of it?”

“Everything you need, as long as you seal the deal tonight. Once business opens tomorrow, it’s back to courtroom delays and he-said, she-said.”

“And you’ll have done a lot of sweating for nothing.”

Braxton jabbed a thick finger at Angel. “That better not happen.”

Angel laughed at the implied threat. “I already got my housing permits, *cabrón*. Go frighten your secretaries.”

“Just because you’re Case’s pet doesn’t mean I can’t make your life miserable.”

Angel didn’t look up from the injunctions. “Just because you’re Case’s dog don’t mean I can’t toss you off this bridge.”

The seals and stamps on the injunctions all looked like they were in order.

“What have you got on Case that makes you so untouchable?” Braxton asked.

“She trusts me.”

Braxton laughed, disbelieving, as Angel put the injunctions back in order.

Angel said, “People like you write everything down because you know everyone is a liar. It’s how you lawyers do.” He slapped Braxton in the chest with the legal documents, grinning. “And that’s why Case trusts me and treats you like a dog—you’re the one who writes things down.”

He left Braxton glaring at him from the bridge.

As Angel made his way down the Cascade Trail, he pulled out his cell and dialed.

Catherine Case answered on the first ring, clipped and formal. “This is Case.”

Angel could imagine her, Queen of the Colorado, leaning over her desk, with maps of the state of Nevada and the Colorado River Basin floor to ceiling on the walls around her, her domain laid out in real-time data feeds—the veins of every tributary blinking red, amber, or green indicating stream flow in cubic feet per second. Numbers flickering over the various catchment basins of the Rocky Mountains—red, amber, green—monitoring how much snow cover remained

and variation off the norm as it melted. Other numbers, displaying the depths of reservoirs and dams, from the Blue Mesa Dam on the Gunnison, to the Navajo Dam on the San Juan, to the Flaming Gorge Dam on the Green. Over it all, emergency purchase prices on streamflows and futures offers scrolled via NASDAQ, available open-market purchase options if she needed to recharge the depth in Lake Mead, the unforgiving numbers that ruled her world as relentlessly as she ruled Angel's and Braxton's.

"Just talked to your favorite lawyer," Angel said.

"Please tell me you didn't antagonize him again."

"That *pendejo* is a piece of work."

"You're not so easy, either. You have everything you need?"

"Well, Braxton gave me a lot of dead trees, that's for sure." He hefted the sheaf of legal documents. "Didn't know so much paper still existed."

"We like to make sure we're all on the same page," Case said dryly.

"Same fifty or sixty pages, more like."

Case laughed. "It's the first rule of bureaucracy: any message worth sending is worth sending in triplicate."

Angel exited the Cascade Trail, winding down toward where elevator banks would whisk him to central parking. "Figure we should be up in about an hour," he said.

"I'll be monitoring."

"This is a milk run, boss. Braxton's papers here got about a hundred different signatures say I can do anything I want. This is old-school cease and desist. Camel Corps could do this one on their own, I bet. Glorified FedEx is what this is."

"No." Case's voice hardened. "Ten years of back-and-forth in the courts is what this is, and I want it finished. For good this time. I'm tired of giving away Cypress housing permits to some judge's nephew just so we can keep appealing for something that's ours by right."

"No worries. When we're done, Carver City won't know what hit them."

"Good. Let me know when it's finished."

She clicked off. Angel caught an express elevator as it was closing. He stepped to the glass as the elevator began its plunge. It acceler-

ated, plummeting down through the levels of the arcology. People blurred past: mothers pushing double strollers; hourly girlfriends clinging to the arms of weekend boyfriends; tourists from all over the world, snapping pics and messaging home they had seen the Hanging Gardens of Las Vegas. Ferns and waterfalls and coffee shops.

Down on the entertainment floors, the dealers would be changing shifts. In the hotels the twenty-four-hour party people would be waking up and taking their first shots of vodka, spraying glitter on their skin. Maids and waiters and busboys and cooks and maintenance staff would all be hard at work, striving to keep their jobs, fighting to keep their Cypress housing permits.

You're all here because of me, Angel thought. Without me, you'd all be little tumbleweeds. Little bone-and-paper-skin bodies. No dice to throw, no hookers to buy, no strollers to push, no drinks at your elbow, no work to do . . .

Without me, you're nothing.

The elevator hit bottom with a soft chime. Its doors opened to Angel's Tesla, waiting with the valet.

Half an hour later he was striding across the boiling tarmac of Mulroy Airbase, heat waves rippling off the tarmac, and the sun setting bloody over the Spring Mountains. One hundred twenty degrees, and the sun only finally finishing the job. The floodlights of the base were coming on, adding to the burn.

"You got our papers?" Reyes shouted over the whine of Apaches.

"Feds love our desert asses!" Angel held up the documents. "For the next fourteen hours, anyway!"

Reyes barely smiled in response, just turned and started initiating launch orders.

Colonel Reyes was a big black man who'd been a recon marine in Syria and Venezuela, before moving into hot work in the Sahel and then Chihuahua, before finally dropping into his current plush job with the Nevada guardies.

State of Nevada paid better, he said.

Reyes waved Angel aboard the command chopper. Around them attack helicopters were spinning up, burning synthetic fuel by the barrel—Nevada National Guard, aka Camel Corps, aka those fucking Vegas guardies, depending on who had just had a Hades missile

sheaf fired up their asses—all of them gearing up to inflict the will of Catherine Case upon her enemies.

One of the guardies tossed Angel a flak jacket. Angel shrugged into Kevlar as Reyes settled into the command seat and started issuing orders. Angel plugged military glass and an earbug into the chopper's comms so he could listen to the chatter.

Their gunship lurched skyward. A pilot's-eye data feed spilled into Angel's vision, the graffiti of war coloring Las Vegas with bright hungry tags: target calculations, relevant structures, friend/foe markings, Hades missile loads, and .50-cal belly-gun ammo info, fuel warnings, heat signals on the ground . . .

Ninety-eight point six.

Human beings. Some of the coolest things out there. Each one tagged, not a single one knowing it.

One of the guardies was making sure Angel was strapped in tight. Angel grinned as the lady checked his straps. Dark skin and black hair and eyes like coal. He picked her name off a tag—Gupta.

“Think I know how to strap myself in, right?” he shouted over the rotor noise. “Used to do this work, too.”

Gupta didn't even smile. “Ms. Case's orders. We'd look pretty stupid if we pancaked and you didn't walk away just because you didn't tighten your seat belt.”

“If we pancake, none of us is walking away.”

But she ignored him and did her check anyway. Reyes and the Camel Corps were thorough. They had their own elegant rituals, designed over time and polished to a high shine.

Gupta said something into her comm, then strapped into her own seat behind the screen for the chopper's belly gun.

Angel's stomach lurched as their gunship angled around, joining a formation of other airborne predators. Status updates rolled across his military glass, brighter than Vegas nightscape:

SNWA 6602, away.

SNWA 6608, away.

SNWA 6606, away.

More call signs and numbers scrolled past. Digital confirmation of the nearly invisible locust swarm filling the blackening sky and now streaming south.

Over the comm, Reyes's voice crackled, "Commence Operation Honey Pool."

Angel laughed. "Who came up with that one?"

"Like it?"

"I like Mead."

"Don't we all?"

And then they were hurtling south, toward the Mead in question: twenty-six million acre-feet of water storage at inception, now less than half of that thanks to Big Daddy Drought. An optimistic lake created during an optimistic time, whittled now and filling with silt besides. A lifeline, always threatened and always vulnerable, always on the verge of sinking below Intake No. 3, the critical IV drip that kept the heart of Las Vegas pumping.

Below them, the lights of Vegas central unspooled: casino neon and Cypress arcologies. Hotels and balconies. Domes and condensation-misted vertical farms, leafy with hydroponic greenery and blazing with full-spectrum illumination. Geometries of light sprawling across the desert floor, all of them overlaid with the electronic graffiti of Camel Corps's combat language.

Billboard promises of shows and parties and drinks and money filtered through military glass, and became attack and entry points. Close-packed urban canyons designed to funnel desert winds became sniper alleys. Iridescent photovoltaic-paint roofs became drop zones. The Cypress arcologies became high-ground advantage and priority attack zones, thanks to the way they dominated the Vegas skyline and loomed over everything else, bigger and more ambitious than all of Sin City's previous forays into the fantastical combined.

Vegas ended in a sharp black line.

The combat software started picking out living creatures, cool spots in the dark heat of millennial suburban skeleton—square mile after square mile of buildings that weren't good for anything except firewood and copper wiring because Catherine Case had decided they didn't deserve their water anymore.

Sparse and lonely campfires perforated the blackness, beacons marking the locations of desiccated Texans and Zoners who didn't have enough money to get into a Cypress arcology and had nowhere else to flee. The Queen of the Colorado had slaughtered the hell out

of these neighborhoods: her first graveyards, created in seconds when she shut off the water in their pipes.

“If they can’t police their damn water mains, they can drink dust,” Case had said.

People still sent the lady death threats about that.

The helicopters crossed the last of the wrecked suburban buffer zone and passed out into open desert. Original landscape: Old Testament ancient. Creosote bushes. Joshua trees, spiky and lonely. Yucca eruptions, dry washes, pale gravel sands, quartz pebbles.

The desert was entirely black now and cooling, the scalpel scrape of the sun finally off the land. There’d be animals down there. Nearly hairless coyotes. Lizards and snakes. Owls. A whole world that only came alive once the sun went down. A whole ecosystem emerging from burrows beneath rocks and yucca and creosote.

Angel watched the tiny thermal markers of the desert’s surviving inhabitants and wondered if the desert returned his gaze, if some skinny coyote looked up at the muffled thud-thwap of Camel Corps gunships flying overhead and marveled at this charge of airborne humanity.

An hour passed.

“We’re close,” Reyes said, breaking the stillness. His voice was almost reverent. Angel leaned forward, searching.

“There she is,” Gupta said.

A black ribbon of water, twisting through desert, cutting between ragged mountain ridges.

Shining moonlight spilled across the waters in slicks of silver.

The Colorado River.

It wound like a serpent through the pale scapes of the desert. California hadn’t put this stretch of river into a straw yet, but it would. All that evaporation—couldn’t let the sun steal that forever. But for now the river still flowed in the open, exposed to sky and the guardies’ solemn view.

Angel peered down at the river, awed as always. The radio chatter of the guardies ceased, all of them falling silent at the sight of so much water.

Even much reduced by droughts and diversions, the Colorado River awakened reverent hungers. Seven million acre-feet a year,

down from sixteen million . . . but still, so much water, simply there on the land . . .

No wonder Hindus worshipped rivers, Angel thought.

In its prime, the Colorado River had run more than a thousand miles, from the white-snow Rockies down through the red-rock canyons of Utah and on to the blue Pacific, tumbling fast and without obstruction. And wherever it touched—life. If a farmer could put a diversion on it, or a homebuilder could sink a well beside it, or a casino developer could throw a pump into it, a person could drink deep of possibility. A body could thrive in 115-degree heat. A city could blossom in a desert. The river was a blessing as sure as the Virgin Mother's.

Angel wondered what the river looked like back when it still ran free and fast. These days the river ran low and sluggish, stoppered behind huge dams. Blue Mesa Dam, Flaming Gorge Dam, Morrow Point Dam, Soldier Creek Dam, Navajo Dam, Glen Canyon Dam, Hoover Dam, and more. And wherever dams held back the river and its tributaries, lakes formed, reflecting desert sky and sun: Lake Powell. Lake Mead. Lake Havasu . . .

These days Mexico never saw a drop of water hit its border, no matter how much it complained about the Colorado River Compact and the Law of the River. Children down in the Cartel States grew up and died thinking that the Colorado River was as much a myth as the *chupacabra* that Angel's old *abuela* had told him about. Hell, most of Utah and Colorado weren't allowed to touch the water that filled the canyon below Angel's chopper.

"Ten minutes to contact," Reyes announced.

"Any chance they'll fight?"

Reyes shook his head. "Zoners don't have much to defend with. Still got most of their units deployed up in the Arctic."

That had been Case's doing, greasing a bunch of East Coast politicians who didn't care what the hell happened on this side of the Continental Divide. She'd gorged those pork-barrel bastards on hookers and cocaine and vast sloshing oceans of Super PAC cash, so when the Joint Chiefs discovered a desperate need to defend tar sands pipelines way up north, coincidentally, the only folks who could do the job were the desert rats of the Arizona National Guard.

Angel remembered watching the news as they deployed, the relentless rah-rah of energy security from the feeds. He'd enjoyed watching all the journos beating the patriotism drums and getting their ratings up. Making citizens feel like badass Americans again. The journos were good for that, at least. For a second, Americans could still feel like big swinging dicks.

Solidarity, baby.

The Camel Corps's two dozen choppers dropped into the river's canyon, skimming black waters. They wound along its serpentine length, hemmed in on either side by stony hills, sweeping up the liquid curves of the Colorado to the target.

Angel was starting to grin, feeling the familiar rush of adrenaline that came when all bets were made and all anyone could do was find out what lay in the dealer's deck.

He clutched the court's injunctions to his chest. All those seals and hologram stamps. All that ritual of lawsuits and appeals, all leading to a moment when they could finally take the gloves off.

Arizona would never know what hit them.

He laughed. "Times they do change."

Gupta, riding the belly gun, glanced over. "What's that you saying?"

She was young, Angel realized. Young, as he'd been when Case put him in the guardies and got his state residence approved once and for all. Poor and desperate deportee, looking to find some way—any way—to stay on the right side of the border.

"How old are you?" he asked. "Twelve?"

She gave him a dirty look and brought her focus back to her targeting systems.

"Twenty. Old man."

"Don't be cold." He pointed down at the Colorado. "You're too young to remember how it used to be. Used to be that we all sat down with a bunch of lawyers and papers, bureaucrats with pocket protectors . . ."

He trailed off, remembering early days, when he'd stood body-guard behind Catherine Case as she went into meetings: bald bureaucrat guys, city water managers, Bureau of Reclamation, Department of the Interior. All of them talking acre-feet and reclamation guide-

lines and cooperation, wastewater efficiency, recycling, water banking, evaporation reduction and river covers, tamarisk and cottonwood and willow elimination. All of them trying to rearrange deck chairs on a big old *Titanic*. All of them playing the game by the rules, believing there was a way for everyone to get by, pretending they could cooperate and share their way out of the situation if they just got real clever about the problem.

And then California tore up the rulebook and chose a new game.

“Were you saying something?” Gupta pressed.

“Nah.” Angel shook his head. “Game’s changed is all. Case used to play that old game pretty good.” He grabbed his seat for support as they popped up over the canyon rim and bore down on their target. “We do okay with this new game, too.”

Ahead, their objective glowed in the darkness, a whole complex standing alone in the desert.

“There it is.”

Lights started winking out.

“They know we’re coming,” Reyes said, and began issuing battle instructions.

The choppers spread out, picking likely targets as they came into range. Their own chopper plunged lower, joined by a pair of support drones. Angel’s military glass showed another cluster of choppers running ahead, opening up airspace. He gritted his teeth as they started dropping and jiggling, keeping their movement random, waiting to see if the ground tried to light them up.

Off on the far horizon, he could see the orange glow of Carver City. Houses and businesses bright and shining, a halo of urbanity blazing against the night sky. All those electric lights. All that A/C.

All that life.

Gupta fired a couple rounds. Something lit up below, a fountain of flames. Their gunships swept over the leading edge of the water-pumping and -treatment facilities. Pools and pipes running all over the place.

Black Apaches settled on rooftops and parking lots, dropped to pavement, and belched forth troops. More gunships thudded down like giant dragonflies alighting. Rotor wash kicked up quartz sands, scouring Angel’s face.

“Showtime!” Reyes motioned at Angel. Angel checked his flak jacket a final time and snapped the chin strap of his helmet.

Gupta watched, smiling. “You want a gun, old man?”

“Why?” Angel asked as he jumped out. “That’s why I got you with me.”

Guardies formed around him. Together they dashed for the plant’s main doors.

Floodlights were coming up, workers rushing out, knowing what was coming. Camel Corps had their rifles up and ready, keeping sights on the targets ahead. Amplified orders blasted from Gupta’s comm.

“Everyone on the ground. Down! Get DOWN!”

Civilians hit the deck.

Angel jogged up to a huddled and terrified woman, waved his papers. “You got a Simon Yu in there somewhere?” he shouted over the shriek of the choppers.

She was too scared to speak. Sort of pudgy white lady with brown hair. Angel grinned. “Hey, lady, I’m just serving papers.”

“Inside,” she finally gasped.

“Thanks.” Angel slapped her on the back. “Why don’t you run all your coworkers out of here? In case things get hot.”

He and the soldiers rammed through the treatment plant’s doors, a wedge of weaponry with Angel striding at its heart. Civvies slapped themselves up against the walls as Camel Corps stampeded past.

“Vegas in the house!” Angel crowed. “Grab your ankles, boys and girls!”

Gupta’s amplified orders drowned him out. *“Clear out! All of you! You got thirty minutes to evacuate this facility. After that you’re obstructing!”*

Angel and his team hit the main control rooms: flat-screen computers monitoring effluence, water quality, chemical inputs, pump efficiency—along with a whole pack of water-quality engineers, looking like surprised gophers as they popped up from their workstations.

“Where’s me some supervisor?” Angel demanded. “I want me some Simon Yu.”

A man straightened. “I’m Yu.” Slim and tanned, balding. Comb-over. Scars of old acne on his cheeks.

Angel tossed papers at him as Camel Corps spread out and secured the control room. “You’re shut down.”

Yu caught the papers clumsily. “The hell we are! This is on appeal.”

“Appeal all you want, tomorrow,” Angel said. “Tonight you got an order to shut down. Check the signatures.”

“We’re supplying a hundred thousand people! You can’t just turn off their water.”

“Judges say we’ve got senior rights,” Angel said. “You should be glad we’re letting you keep what you already got in your pipes. If your people are careful, they can live on buckets for a couple days, till they clear out.”

Yu was riffing through the papers. “But this ruling is a farce! We’re getting a stay, and this is going to be overturned. This ruling—it barely exists! Tomorrow it’s gone!”

“Knew you’d say something like that. Problem is, it’s not tomorrow right now. It’s today. And today the judges say you got to stop stealing the state of Nevada’s water.”

“You’re going to be liable, though!” Yu sputtered. He made a heroic effort to calm himself. “We both know how serious this is. Whatever happens to Carver City is on you. We have security cams. All of this is going to be public record. You can’t want this to be on your head when judgments start coming down.”

Angel decided he kind of liked the balding bureaucrat. Simon Yu was *dedicated*. Had the feel of one of those good-government guys who got a job because he wanted to make the world a better place. Genuine old-school civil servant genuinely dedicated to the old-school benefit of the people. And now here the guy was, cajoling Angel. Playing the let’s-be-reasonable, don’t-be-hasty game.

Too bad it wasn’t the game they were playing.

“... This is going to piss off a lot of powerful people,” Yu was saying. “You aren’t going to get off. The feds aren’t going to let something like this happen.”

It was a bit like meeting a dinosaur, Angel decided. Kind of icy to see, sure, but really, how the hell had the man ever survived?

“Powerful people?” Angel smiled gently. “You cut a deal with California I’m not aware of? They own your water, and somehow I don’t know? ’Cause from where we stand, you’re pumping some

crappy junior water right that you bought secondhand off a farmer in western Colorado, and you got no cards left to play. This is water that should have come to us a long time ago. Says so in those papers I just gave you.”

Yu gave Angel a sullen glare.

“Come on, Yu.” Angel lightly punched the man in the shoulder. “Don’t look so down. We both been in this game long enough to know someone’s got to lose. Law of the River says senior rights gets it all. Junior rights?” Angel shrugged. “Not so much.”

“Who did you pay off?” Yu asked. “Stevens? Arroyo?”

“Does it matter?”

“It’s a hundred thousand people’s lives!”

“Shouldn’t have bet them on such crappy water rights, then,” Gupta commented from across the control room, where she was checking out the flashing lights of pump monitors.

Angel hid a smirk as Yu shot her a dirty look. “The soldier’s right, Yu. You got your notice there. We’re giving you twenty-five more minutes to clear out, and after that I’m dropping some Hades and Hellfire on this place. So clear it out before we light it up.”

“You’re going to blow us up?”

A bunch of the soldiers laughed at that.

Gupta said, “You did see us come in with the helicopters, right?”

“I’m not leaving,” Yu said coldly. “You can kill me if you want. Let’s see how that works out for you.”

Angel sighed. “I just knew you’d be stand-up that way.”

Before Yu could retort, Angel grabbed him and slammed him to the floor. He buried a knee in the bureaucrat’s back. Grabbed an arm and twisted it.

“You’re destroying—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” Angel wrenched Yu’s other hand behind his back and zip-cuffed him. “A whole fucking city. A hundred thousand lives. Plus somebody’s golf course. But like you noticed, dead bodies do make things complicated, so we’re taking your bald ass out of here. You can sue us tomorrow.”

“You can’t do this!” Yu shouted from where his face was mashed into the floor.

Angel knelt down beside the helpless man. “I feel like you’re tak-

ing this personally, Simon. But it ain't that way. We're just cogs in a big old machine, right?" He jerked Yu upright. "This is bigger than you and me. We're both just doing our jobs." He gave Yu a shove, propelling him through the doors. To Gupta, he called back, "Check the rest of the place, and make sure it's cleared. I want this place on fire in ten!"

Outside Reyes was standing at the chopper door, waiting.

"We've got Zoners, incoming!" Reyes shouted.

"Well, that ain't good. How long?"

"Five minutes."

"Fucking hell." Angel made a twirling motion with his finger. "Spin us up, then! I got what I came for."

Chopper blades came alive, an angry shriek. Their whine drowned out Yu's next words, but his expression was enough for Angel to understand the man's hatred.

"Don't take this personally!" Angel shouted back. "In another year we'll hire you up in Vegas! You're too good to waste here! SNWA can use good people like you!"

Angel tried to tug Yu into the chopper, but the man resisted. He was glaring at Angel, eyes squinting against the dustwash. Guardie choppers started lifting off, locusts rising. Angel gave Yu another tug. "Time to go, old man."

"The hell you say!"

With sudden surprising strength, Yu tore free and bolted back toward his water-treatment plant, stumbling, hands still zip-cuffed behind his back but running determinedly for the building from which the last of his people were fleeing.

Angel exchanged a pained look with Reyes.

Dedicated bastard. Right down to the end, the pencil-pusher was dedicated.

"We've got to go!" Reyes shouted. "If the Zoners get their choppers up here, we'll end up in a firefight, and the feds will be all up on our asses then. There's some shit they won't put up with, and a state-to-state gun battle is definitely one of them. We need to clear out!"

Angel looked back at Yu as he fled. "Just give me one minute!"

"Thirty seconds!"

Angel gave Reyes a disgusted look and charged after Yu.

All around him choppers were lifting off, rising like leaves on hot desert winds. Angel pelted through the flying grit, squinting against sand sting.

He caught Yu at the door to the treatment plan. “Well, you’re stubborn. I’ll give you that.”

“Let me go!”

Instead, Angel flipped him hard onto the ground. The landing took Yu’s breath away, and Angel took advantage of the man’s paralysis to zip-cuff his ankles, too.

“Leave me the fuck alone!”

“Normally, I’d just cut you like a pig and be done with it,” Angel grunted, as he hefted Yu onto his back in a fireman’s carry. “But since we’re doing this all aboveboard and public, that’s not on the table. But don’t push me. Seriously.” He began lumbering for the sole remaining chopper.

The last of Carver City’s treatment-plant workers were diving into their cars and speeding away from the pumping facility, kicking up plumes of dust. Rats jumping the sinking ship.

Reyes was glaring at Angel. “Hurry the fuck up!”

“I’m here! Let’s go already!”

Angel dumped Yu into the chopper. They lifted off with Angel riding the skid. He clawed his way inside.

Gupta was at her gun, already opening fire as Angel strapped in. Angel’s military glass lit up with firing solutions. He peered out the open door as military intelligence software portioned out the water-treatment plant: filtering towers, pumping engines, power supply, backup generators—

Missiles spat from the choppers’ tubes, arcs of fire, silent in the air and then explosively loud as they buried themselves in the guts of Carver City’s water infrastructure.

Flaming mushrooms boiled up into the night, bathing the desert orange, illuminating the black locust shapes of the hovering choppers as they launched more rounds.

Simon Yu lay at Angel’s feet, zip-cuffed and impotent to stop the destruction, watching as his world went up in mushroom clouds.

In the flickering light of the explosions, Angel could make out

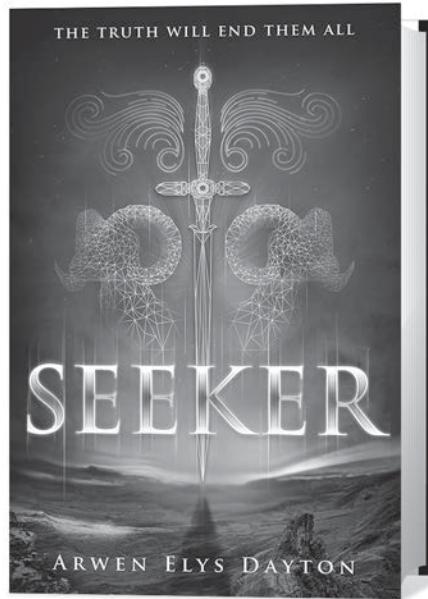
tears on the man's face. Water gushing from his eyes, as telling in its own way as a man's sweat: Simon Yu, mourning the place he'd tried so hard to save. Sucker had ice in his blood, for sure. Didn't look it, but the sucker had him some ice.

Too bad it hadn't helped.

It's the end of times, Angel thought as more missiles pummeled the water-treatment plant. *It's the goddamn end of times*.

And then on the heels of that thought, another followed, unbidden.

Guess that makes me the Devil.



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The night Quin Kincaid takes her Oath, she will become what she has trained to be her entire life. She will become a Seeker. This is her legacy, and it is an honor. As a Seeker, Quin will fight beside her two closest companions, Shinobu and John, to protect the weak and the wronged. Together they will stand for light in a shadowy world. And she’ll be with the boy she loves—who’s also her best friend. But the night Quin takes her Oath, everything changes. Being a Seeker is not what she thought. Her family is not what she thought. Even the boy she loves is not who she thought. And now it’s too late to walk away.

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QUIN

It would be nice to make it through alive, Quin thought. She ducked to the right as her opponent's sword came whistling past the left side of her body, nearly slicing off her arm. Quin's own whipsword was coiled in her hand in its whip form. With a crack, she flicked it out, and it solidified into a long sword. *It'd be a shame if he split my head open now. I'm so close to success.* The enormous man she was fighting looked delighted at the thought of killing her.

The sunlight was in Quin's eyes, but on reflex she raised her weapon over her head and stopped her opponent's next strike before it cut her skull in two. The force of his blow against her sword was like a tree trunk falling upon her, and her legs buckled.

"Got you, haven't I?" her adversary roared. Alistair MacBain was the biggest man she knew. He stood over her, his red hair glowing like an evil Scottish halo in the dusty sunbeams coming through the skylight. He was also her uncle, but that didn't mean anything at the moment.

Quin scuttled backward. Alistair's huge arm swung his oversized

weapon as if it were no more than a conductor's baton. *He really intends to kill me*, she realized.

Her eyes swept the room. John and Shinobu were staring at her from where they sat on the barn floor, both clutching their whipswords like life preservers but neither able to help. This was her fight.

"Useless, aren't they?" her uncle commented.

Quin got a knee beneath herself and saw Alistair's wrist flick, changing his enormous whipsword from the long, slender form he'd been using to a thick and deadly claymore—the preferred sword for a Scotsman about to strike a death blow. The dark material of his weapon slid back upon itself like oil, then solidified. He raised it above his head and drove it straight down at her skull. Quin wondered how many of her ancestors had been turned to mincemeat by swords shaped like this one.

I am thinking, and it's going to get me killed, she told herself.

Seekers did not *think* when they fought. And unless Quin stopped her mental chatter, Alistair was going to spill her brains all over the clean straw on the barn floor. *Which I just swept*, she thought. And then: *For God's sake, Quin, stop it!*

Just as she would tense the muscles of her hand to form a fist, Quin focused her mind. At once, things became quiet.

Alistair's claymore was hurtling through the air toward her head. His eyes looked down on her as his arms swung the sword, his feet slightly apart, one in front of the other. Quin saw a tiny shake in his left leg, as if he were off balance just a bit. It was enough. He was vulnerable.

In the moment before Alistair's sword should have crashed through her forehead, Quin ducked, pivoted toward him. Her wrist was already twisting, commanding her whipsword into a new shape. It melted into itself, becoming an oily black liquid for a split second, then solidified into a thick dagger. Her uncle's claymore missed her

and made a heavy impact with the barn floor behind her. At the same moment, Quin launched forward, burying her weapon in Alistair's left calf.

"Ahh!" the big man screamed. "You've got me!"

"I have, Uncle, haven't I?" She felt a smile of satisfaction pulling at her lips.

Instead of cutting flesh from bone, Quin's whipsword puddled into itself as it touched Alistair's flesh—it, like Alistair's sword, was set for a training session and would not actually harm its opponent. But if this had been a real fight—and it had certainly felt real—Alistair would have been disabled.

"Match!" Quin's father, Briac Kincaid, called from across the room, signaling the end of the fight.

She heard cheers from John and Shinobu. Quin pulled her weapon away from Alistair's leg, and it re-formed into its dagger shape. Alistair's own blade was stuck six inches into the hard-packed barn floor. He flicked his wrist, collapsing the whipsword, which snaked out of the ground and back into a coil in his hand.

They'd been fighting in the center of the huge training barn, whose old stone walls rose around the dirt floor with its covering of straw. Sunlight streamed through four large skylights in the stone roof, and a breeze came in the open barn doors, through which a wide meadow was visible.

Quin's father, their primary instructor, stepped to the center of the floor, and Quin realized her fight with Alistair had been only a warm-up. The whipsword Briac was carrying in his right hand was a child's toy compared to the weapon he wore strapped across his chest. It was called a *disruptor*. Forged of an iridescent metal, it resembled the barrel of an enormous gun, almost like a small cannon. Quin kept her gaze locked upon it, watching the metal flash as Briac moved through a patch of sunlight.

She glanced at Shinobu and John. They seemed to understand what she was thinking: *Brace yourselves. I have no idea what's happening now.*

“It is time,” her uncle Alistair said, addressing the three apprentices. “You’re old enough. Some of you”—here he looked at John—“are older than you should be.”

John was sixteen, a year older than Quin and Shinobu. He should have taken his oath already, by the normal schedule, but he had started his training late—he’d been twelve, while Quin and Shinobu had started at eight. This was a source of ongoing frustration to him, and his cheeks reddened at Alistair’s comment, an effect quite noticeable on his fair skin. John was handsome, with a finely carved face, blue eyes, and brown hair with the faintest tint of gold. He was strong and quick, and Quin had been in love with him for some time. He flicked his gaze to her and mouthed silently: *Are you all right?* She nodded.

“Today you must prove yourselves,” Alistair continued. “Are you Seekers? Or are you poxy lumps of horse dung we’ll have to shovel up off the floor?”

Shinobu raised his hand, and Quin suspected he was going to say, *It happens I am a poxy lump of horse dung, sir . . .*

“This is no joke, Son,” Alistair said, cutting Shinobu off before his quips could begin.

Shinobu was Quin’s cousin, the son of the giant red-haired man who had just attempted to decapitate her. Shinobu’s mother had been Japanese, and his face had taken the best features from the East and the West and combined them into something nearly perfect. He had straight, dark red hair and a wiry body that was already taller than that of the average Japanese male. He turned his eyes to the floor, as if to apologize for making light of the moment.

“For you and Quin, this may be your final practice fight,” Alistair

explained to Shinobu. “And for you, John, your chance to prove you still belong here. Do you understand?”

They all nodded. John’s eyes, however, were fixed on the disruptor strapped across Briac’s upper body. Quin knew what he was thinking: *Unfair*. And it was unfair. John was the best fighter of the three of them . . . except when there was a disruptor involved.

“Does this bother you, John?” Briac asked, slapping the strange weapon on his chest. “Does it hurt your focus? It’s not even on yet. What will happen when it is?”

John wisely did not answer.

“Take your weapons out of practice mode,” Alistair ordered.

Quin looked down at the grip of her whipsword. At the end of the hilt was a tiny slot. Reaching into a pocket in the old leather of her right boot, she drew out a small object like a flattened cylinder, made of the same oily black material as her sword. She slid this into the slot on the handgrip, her fingers automatically adjusting the tiny dials on the attachment. As the last dial moved into place, the whipsword in her hand gave off a delicate vibration, and immediately it felt different, as if it were ready to do what it was made to do.

She grabbed the tip with her left hand and watched it melt and puddle around her skin. Even “live” it would not harm her flesh. But everyone else’s flesh was now fair game.

Quin’s heartbeat was speeding up as she watched her father and Alistair taking their own whipswords out of practice mode. A “live” fight was no easy task. But if she did well, she was minutes away from her father’s approval, from joining her ancestors in the noble duties of a Seeker. Since early childhood, she’d been listening to Alistair’s stories of Seekers using their skill to alter the world for the better. And since the age of eight, she’d been training to develop those skills. If she succeeded now, she would finally be one of them.

John and Shinobu had finished adjusting their own whipswords,

and the barn was now filled with a different sort of energy, a sense of deadly anticipation. Quin's eyes met John's, and she gave him a look that said, *We can do this*. He nodded subtly back to her. *Be ready, John*, she thought. *We'll do this together, and we'll be together . . .*

A high-pitched noise cut through the barn, so piercing that Quin wondered for a moment if it was only in her head. The look on John's face was enough to tell her different. The strange cannon-like gun her father wore, the disruptor, had come to life. The base of it covered her father's whole chest and had to be held in place with straps over his shoulders and around his back. The barrel was ten inches wide, and instead of a single hole, there were hundreds of tiny openings in the iridescent metal. These openings were randomly placed and of different sizes, and somehow this made it look worse. As the disruptor came fully alive, the high-pitched whine faded, replaced by a crackle of electricity in the air around the weapon.

Shinobu shook his head like he was trying to get the sound out of his ears. "Isn't that toy a bit dangerous with so many of us fighting?" he asked.

"If you fail in this fight, you are very likely to be injured," Alistair said, "or even . . . *disrupted*. Anything is fair today. Take a moment to understand this."

The three apprentices had seen the disruptor fired before, had even practiced avoiding it in one-on-one drill sessions, but they had never seen it used in a live fight. The disruptor was made to instill fear, and it was working. *Our purpose is worthy*, Quin repeated to herself. *I will not be afraid. Our purpose is worthy; I will not be afraid . . .*

With his whipsword, Alistair hooked something floating in a metal trough at one side of the barn. The object was a heavy iron circle, about six inches across, covered in thick canvas and soaked in pitch. He sent it flying up into the air.

As the iron circle arced high above him, Alistair lit a match. The disc fell toward him, and he caught it again with his whipsword. He touched the match to it, and the three apprentices watched as it burst into flames. Alistair twirled the disc around his sword, an evil glint in his eye.

“Five minutes,” he said, looking up at the clock high on the wall. “Let no flames spread, keep yourselves alive and sane, have the disc in your possession at the end.”

The apprentices glanced around the barn. There were bales of straw against the walls, loose straw across the floor, racks of old wood holding fighting equipment, climbing ropes hanging down from the ceiling, not to mention the barn itself, with its wooden beams and rafters supporting the stone walls. In short, they would be tossing around the burning disc in a room full of kindling.

“No flames!” Shinobu muttered. “We’ll be lucky if we don’t burn the place to the ground.”

“We can do it,” Quin and John both whispered at the same time. A quick smile passed between them, and she could feel John’s arm pressing against her own, warm and strong.

Alistair tossed the disc high up into the rafters.

“Prove yourselves!” Briac roared, cracking out his own whipsword. Then he and Alistair ran toward the apprentices with their weapons raised.

“I’ve got it!” yelled Shinobu, leaping out of Alistair’s way and running for the center of the barn, where the disc was now spinning down toward the straw covering the floor.

Quin saw Briac heading straight for John. Flicking his whipsword into the shape of a scimitar, Briac swung it in a wide arc aimed to slice John in half. She watched John’s whipsword flash out to block, and then Alistair was upon her.

“I have it!” yelled Shinobu as he landed the burning disc on his whipsword. It slid down toward his hand, the flames burning his fingers, and he had to spin it back up to the tip of his sword.

Alistair slashed at Quin, and she moved to one side, changing her sword into a shorter blade and striking at his back. He was already pivoting to meet her attack, turning her weapon aside.

“Not fast enough, lass,” he said. “You hesitate when you strike. Why? You’ll have the most precious artifact in the history of mankind in your hands, won’t you? You can’t hesitate. And when you’re *There*, when you step *between*, hesitation will be fatal.” This was Alistair’s mantra, which he’d been drumming into their heads for years.

John and Briac were exchanging blows. Briac looked like he had every intention of killing John as soon as he got the chance. Yet John was keeping up with him—he was a superb fighter when he focused. But a glance told Quin that John was fighting angry, and he was terrified of the disruptor. Sometimes you could direct anger and fear into useful energy. But usually, emotion was a disadvantage. It scattered your mind, made you spend energy unwisely.

Suddenly Quin realized that Alistair had backed her right into John, and now he was fighting them both. Briac was freed to turn toward Shinobu. The hum of the disruptor intensified to an unbearable volume.

“I’m tossing the ring!” Shinobu shouted. In the same moment, the disruptor on Briac’s chest fired. Shinobu threw the disc high up toward the rafters above Quin and John as the barrel of the disruptor released a thousand angry sparks of electricity. These sparks rushed through the air toward Shinobu, buzzing like a swarm of bees.

Shinobu hurled himself down beneath the volley and rolled away. With no human target to strike, the sparks collided against the back wall of the gym in bursts of rainbow-colored light.

“Got it,” John yelled, leaping away from the fight with Alistair

and hooking the falling disc onto his own sword. A glob of pitch oozed off the metal ring and onto a bale of hay, immediately setting it on fire. John stamped out the flames as the disc fell down upon his hand, burning him.

“Shinobu!” he called, flinging the ring back toward the rafters. He jumped in front of Quin, taking her place under Alistair’s punishing blows, as Shinobu caught the disc across the room.

Quin tried to rest her sword arm for a moment, but Briac was coming with the disruptor. Sparks launched toward her, crackling and buzzing.

If she let those sparks reach her, she would never be free of them. They would not kill, but they would be the end of her. *A disruptor field is worse than dying*— Quin stopped her thoughts. She was going to be a Seeker, a finder of hidden ways. There was only the fight; consequences did not exist.

She jumped to the side, grabbing a climbing rope and swinging out of reach. The sparks from the disruptor passed by and danced along the wall behind her, dispersing harmlessly.

She landed behind her father. He was already turning, flicking his sword out into a slender, evil blade. Before she’d regained her footing, he struck, his weapon slicing through her shirt at her forearm and cutting into the skin underneath.

Blood began trickling down her arm, and there might have been pain, but she had no time to think about it. The high whine of the disruptor was building again.

Shinobu was fighting Alistair now. John had the disc again, and he was spinning it around his whipsword to keep it from burning his hand as he stamped out another fire on a bale of hay.

Briac turned, fired the disruptor again, this time at John.

“John!” yelled Quin.

He tossed the ring blindly as he saw the sparks racing toward him.

Quin expected him to leap out of the way, but instead he was frozen, staring at those sparks, suddenly lost.

“John!” she yelled again.

At the last moment, Shinobu leapt away from his fight with Alistair and tackled John. The two apprentices sprawled safely out of the disruptor’s path. The sparks struck the wall where John’s head had been, disappearing in flashes of light.

Quin had forgotten the disc in her concern for John, and the fiery circle was bouncing across the floor, setting the straw in its path alight.

The disruptor was at its full whine once more. Quin saw the enjoyment on her father’s face as he fired it at John again.

John turned, transfixed. He was staring at the sparks coming at him, hypnotized by their awful beauty. Permanent—that’s what the disruptor was. If the sparks reached you, they took your mind and didn’t leave. And John was waiting to be hit.

She saw Shinobu kick John to the side, sending him out of the disruptor’s path a second time.

John fell to the floor, and this time he stayed down.

Quin retrieved the burning disc and stamped out the flames it had left along the floor. For the first time in the fight, she was angry. Her father was specifically targeting John. It was unfair.

She tossed the disc to Shinobu, ran across the barn, and slammed her body into Briac, knocking him and the disruptor to the ground. Sparks shot up toward the ceiling and bounced among the rafters in a chaotic pattern.

Quin brought her sword down at her father’s face as hard as she could.

“Match!” Briac yelled, before she could strike him. Instantly Quin obeyed his order and collapsed her whipsword.

Shinobu caught the flaming disc for the last time. Quin looked

at the clock, astonished to find that only five minutes had passed. It had felt like a year. John slowly stood up from the floor. Everyone was breathing hard.

Briac got to his feet. He and Alistair seemed to share a silent assessment of the fight. Alistair smiled. Then Briac turned and walked toward the equipment room, limping slightly.

“Quin and Shinobu, midnight,” he called, without turning around. “We meet at the standing stone. You will have a busy night.” He paused in the doorway of the equipment room. “John, you have bested the others and even me many times, but I saw no evidence of that skill here. You will meet me in the commons at dinnertime. We will speak frankly.”

With that, he shut the door firmly behind him.

Quin and Shinobu looked at each other. Quin’s anger had disappeared. Half of her wanted to scream in delight. She’d never fought like that before. Tonight she would take her oath. The life she had been anticipating since childhood would finally begin. But the other half of her was with John, who stood in the center of the barn, staring at the floor.

JOHN

The sun was getting low in the sky over the Scottish estate as John walked away from the training barn. He and Quin had left the barn separately, as they always did, but he knew she would be waiting for him.

A thousand years ago, there had been a castle on the estate, which had belonged to some distant branch of Quin's family. The castle was in ruins now, its crumbling towers perched above the wide river that encircled the land. As he walked, he could see the very highest point of the ruins in the distance.

Now the estate was made up of ancient cottages, most built over the centuries from stones carried off from the castle. The cottages were dotted around the edge of a huge meadow, called the commons. It was spring now, and the commons was full of wildflowers. Beyond the meadow, the woods began, a tall forest of oak and elm that crept right up to overshadow the houses and marched away to the ruins and beyond.

Barns lay at one end of the meadow. Some had animals in them,

but others, like the enormous training barn, were where the apprentices practiced the skills they would need as Seekers.

John walked through the shadows at the edge of the woods, then headed deeper into the trees. Even with his tremendous failure on the practice floor hanging over him, he felt his pulse quickening. He was entering another world, when he was in the woods with Quin, away from the parts of his life that usually overshadowed everything. He hadn't been alone with her in days, and finding her seemed more important than anything else at this moment.

She never chose the same spot to wait, but he must be getting close now. He was in their favorite part of the woods, where the canopies of the great trees touched overhead, blocking the sun and leaving the forest floor dark and quiet. A moment later, he felt hands encircling his waist and a chin sliding onto his shoulder.

"Hello," she whispered into his ear.

"Hello," he whispered back, smiling.

"Look what I found . . ."

She slipped her hand into his. Quin had dark hair cut chin length and a lovely face with ivory skin and large, dark eyes. Those eyes flashed at him mischievously as he followed. She led him to a stand of oaks that had grown in such a way as to create a tiny, secluded space in their center. She stepped through an opening between two of the trees and pulled John after her.

In a moment they were standing together inside the thicket. "It's not exactly the finest room at the village inn," she murmured.

"It's better," he said. "At an inn, you might be standing farther away."

There wasn't really enough room for both of them, and John was forced to pull her up against him, which was all right with him. He leaned down to kiss her, but Quin stopped him, putting her hands on either side of his face.

“I’m worried,” she whispered.

He could tell. He could feel it coming off her in waves, like heat off asphalt in the summer. She was right to be worried, of course. The knowledge they were being taught was ancient, and highly protected. And in John’s case, only perfection in his assigned tasks would win him the privilege of learning it. He was hardly a favorite of Briac’s. His failure in today’s fight was surely the excuse Briac had been looking for.

“I’ve never heard my father say anything quite so . . . final to you,” she said quietly. “What if he means to kick you out?”

The anticipation of meeting her in the forest had pushed aside John’s dread for a few minutes, but now it came back in full force. He was the strongest fighter of the three, yet he’d failed in the fight. He’d failed at the moment when he’d most needed to succeed.

He let his head fall back against a tree trunk. For a moment, he fought the sensation of a large stone pulling him to the bottom of the ocean. *No*, he thought, *I can’t fail. I won’t.*

His whole life was wrapped up in taking this oath. He was John Hart. He would get back what was taken and be at no one’s mercy again. He had promised, and he would keep the promise.

“Briac has to take this seriously,” he told Quin, working hard to sound reassuring, both to her and to himself. He must pull himself up from despair. “I was . . . horrible in that fight, wasn’t I? He’s got to be strict. He’s the ‘protector of hidden ways’ and all that. But he’s spent years training me. I’m almost there. It would be wrong to kick me out now.”

“Of course it would be wrong. It would be completely wrong. But he’s saying—”

“Your father’s an honorable man, isn’t he? He’s going to do what’s right. I’m not worried. And you shouldn’t be either.”

Quin nodded, but her dark eyes were full of doubt. He couldn't blame her. John didn't believe the things he was saying about Briac either. He knew very well the kind of man Quin's father was, but he clung to the hope that Briac would keep his promises. There had been witnesses to those promises, and Briac must honor his commitments. If he didn't . . .

He forced the thought away. Life had been good here on the estate with Quin—as good as his life had ever been, much better than he'd dared to hope for—and he didn't want that to change.

Quin had made friends with John on the day he arrived. They'd been kids then—John only twelve—but even so, his first thought had been of how pretty she was.

In that first year, she and Shinobu both came to visit John in his own cottage frequently, but it was Quin's visits alone he liked the most. She was fascinated with his descriptions of London, and eager to show him all of the estate.

When John's mother had been alive, she'd warned him to keep up his guard around everyone, and he did. But he liked to hear about Quin's family, about the lore of the estate. And Quin seemed to enjoy his company—not because he was wealthy or because his family was important but because she liked him. Just him. He'd never experienced that before. Even at twelve, John refused to let this move him—her interest might have been a trick, a way to get past his defenses and learn his secrets. Still, he spent time with her. With Shinobu he would practice fighting. With Quin he would take walks.

And she began to get . . . curves. He hadn't realized how distracting curves could be. He knew he was in trouble when he was fourteen, sitting in their languages class, and he found himself examining the way Quin's slender waist twisted into her hips. They were being asked to read aloud in Dutch, but he was imagining his hand tracing

the line of her body. He tried to keep her from his mind, to stay as clear and calculating as his mother would have wanted him to be, but he couldn't believe that Quin's friendliness was false.

Then, when she was nearly fifteen, they were paired in an especially difficult practice match in the training barn. Alistair was sending them against each other again and again, demanding that they fight at the extreme limits of their strength.

"Come on, John. Strike her!" Alistair yelled, apparently thinking John was taking it easy on Quin.

Maybe he *was* taking it easy on her. It was winter, and her cheeks were flushed, her dark eyes bright with the exertion of the fight as she moved nimbly with her sword.

She struck him hard and he fell. Perhaps he'd let her hit him, because he didn't mind falling. He imagined tumbling onto the floor with her . . . Then the fight was over and they were both breathing hard, staring at each other across the practice area.

Alistair dismissed them, and John found himself walking outside the training barn in a daze, trying to carry himself as far away from her as he could. He could not see where he was going. He could only see Quin. The desire to be with her was overwhelming.

He stopped around the back of the barn, hiding himself behind the trunks of the barren winter trees. There he leaned against the stone wall, his breath filling the air with steam.

He didn't want to feel what he was feeling. His mother had warned him against love so many times. *When you love, you open yourself to a dagger*, she had told him all those years ago. *When you love deeply, you have thrust the dagger into your own heart*. Love did not fit into any of his plans. But how could you plan for this? It wasn't just her beauty he wanted. It was all of her: the girl who talked to him, the girl who would bite her bottom lip when she was concentrating intensely, the girl who smiled when they walked through the woods together.

He pressed his cheek against the cold stone of the barn, feeling his heart beating wildly, trying to rid himself of the image of her.

Then Quin was there, walking past the end of the barn, only a few feet from him. She was staring ahead, into the woods, also dazed. Their eyes met, and suddenly he knew—he knew she had come looking for him.

John reached out his hand and grabbed the sleeve of her coat, pulling her toward him. And then her arms were around him. Neither of them had ever kissed anyone before, but all at once, he was kissing her. She was warm and soft, and she was kissing him back.

“I was hoping you would do that,” she whispered.

He’d meant to say something romantic and controlled, like *You’re very beautiful*, but instead the deeper truth came tumbling out of him. “I need you,” he whispered to her. “I don’t want to be alone . . . I love you, Quin . . .”

Then they were kissing again.

There were heavy footsteps approaching, twigs breaking. It was Alistair; they could recognize his tread anywhere.

Suddenly they were apart, pushing away from each other. And by the time Alistair reached the end of the barn, Quin had disappeared around the other side, with a final glance at John.

That began their forest meetings. Quin was quite sure her parents wouldn’t approve, so they kept their feelings for each other secret. But eventually it was obvious that everyone on the estate knew of their changed relationship—after a while, John sensed something colder in Briac’s stare, and a subtle irritation in Shinobu’s attitude.

John had tried to justify his feelings. Perhaps it *was* love he felt, but couldn’t love also be an advantage? Wouldn’t Briac have to care more about him when he understood how much he and Quin cared for each other? If he could eventually convince Briac to let her marry him, it would create an alliance, wouldn’t it? An alliance with Briac

wouldn't be pleasant, but it might be a way to fulfill his own promise, at least for a time.

Surely a feeling that made John so happy could not be bad.

Now, between the trees with his arms around Quin, he marveled at how right it felt. When they were alone, he could imagine that she would be by his side for everything to come. Eventually she would understand, even about her own father . . .

"I don't want you to worry," he told her, making her look into his eyes. "I'll be a Seeker, just like you. Even if it takes me a little while to get there. It's meant to be, the two of us together."

The trouble cleared from Quin's face a little. She almost smiled. "It's meant to be," she agreed. "Of course it is." Her certainty gave him heart. "Look," she went on. "You're stronger than Shinobu. You're a lot stronger than I am. You might be smarter than either of us. There are just some things you don't do quite as well."

"If you mean the disruptor—"

"I do mean the disruptor. We're all scared of it."

"I wasn't just scared," John answered, reliving the moment in his mind. "I couldn't move, Quin. I imagined those sparks covering me—"

"Stop." She said it firmly, and John realized his despair was rising again. He must focus, especially today. "You don't want to end up in agony with your mind turning on itself," she continued. "Of course you don't. But you have to think of the disruptor as a weapon like any other weapon. We use our mental control to avoid it in a fight."

"My mind is a muscle that's always slightly tensed," John responded, quoting Alistair, who was their favorite instructor. "Only—I'm not sure that works for me when there's a disruptor involved."

"Try to concentrate on the higher purpose of our training," she told him gently, "on how lucky we are to have this as our calling. Being a Seeker is bigger than you or me, bigger than personal fears."

Her voice was growing passionate, as it often did on this topic. “We’re part of something . . . *exceptional*. I get just as scared, but that’s how I fight my fear. It’s not just about disruptors, you know. You need the mental control when you go *There*. Or you’ll never come out.”

John realized he was looking at her with pity. She was a girl with stars in her eyes, born into the wrong family, and the wrong century. Yes, they were part of something exceptional, something bigger than themselves, but he would describe it in very different words—words such as “ruthless” and “vicious.” Briac was both of those things. John knew she would be going *There* tonight, and then beyond, when she took her oath. Quin might not yet realize the purpose of doing so, but John did. His mother, at least, had been honest with him, where Quin’s father had not been honest with her.

What would she feel when she discovered the truth? That there may have been noble Seekers once, but nobility was not Briac’s style? That her skills were going to be used for a very different purpose?

Softly he asked her, “What do you think you’ll be doing tonight when you take your oath?”

“Briac said it would be a task that requires all of our skills.” He watched her eyes growing distant. “Whatever it is, I feel like every generation of my family for a thousand years is waiting for me to join them,” she said. “My whole life has led up to today.”

John too felt the generations stretching behind him, waiting for him to take his oath. He had promised—*Get it back and repay them for what they’ve done. Our house will rise.*

“And what about the athame?” he asked quietly, pronouncing the word “ATH-uh-may.”

Quin was surprised, as he had expected her to be, for John was not yet privy to all of the secret knowledge that had been given to Quin and Shinobu. He watched her studying him, wondering where he’d learned the word.

“If you know about that,” she said, “then you’re already halfway to knowing everything.”

“I know it’s what Briac’s talking about when he mentions ‘the most valuable artifact in the history of mankind.’ And I know it’s a stone dagger.”

“Even I have only seen it, John. A couple of times. I’ve never used it.”

“Until tonight,” he pointed out.

“Until tonight,” she agreed. She was smiling now, her excitement at the upcoming events returning.

In the distance, they heard loud, happy shouts. Quin ducked down and leaned through the opening between the trees, and John crouched next to her. From this angle, just barely, they had a glimpse across the commons. The shouts were coming from the cottages on the far side of the meadow. It was Shinobu with his father, both yelling about how well Shinobu had done in the fight. Alistair might be gruff and brutal on the practice floor, but with his son, in his free time, he was a teddy bear of a man.

It had always seemed to John that Shinobu was in love with Quin, but since they were cousins of some sort, there was never a question of Quin feeling anything romantic toward Shinobu. And eventually, once he’d had Quin to himself, he’d been able to treat Shinobu with more friendliness.

“They’re celebrating,” John whispered. “We should celebrate.”

“What did you have in mind?” she asked softly.

John slowly pulled her toward him and kissed her. This time she didn’t turn away.

They had always stopped themselves from doing anything more. Quin was waiting. She had her oath to take and at least a year more under her parents’ guidance before they would consider her an adult. But she and John had daydreamed about camping trips across the

river, or rooms in an inn somewhere, someday, when they would finally be able to give themselves to each other.

Now, however, something was different. Maybe it was her anticipation of the evening to come, or the glow of her triumph in the fight, but John felt something more in the way she was kissing him. *She loves me*, he thought, *and I love her. I want her to be with me, even when she knows everything.* The forest floor was covered with years of fallen leaves, and John pulled her down onto that soft ground. He whispered, “Let’s go to my cottage—”

“Shh,” she said, putting a hand to his lips. “Look.”

From where they lay, they could see a figure emerging from deeper in the woods, heading toward them. John pulled Quin up, hiding them from view behind the branches. They watched as the figure got close enough to identify. It was the Young Dread, with a string of dead rabbits slung over her shoulder.

From the look of her face, they had figured her age at about fourteen, though of course, with the Dreads, age was a tricky thing. The Young Dread had arrived on the estate a few months ago, along with the other Dread, the one they called the Big Dread—a burly, dangerous-looking man who appeared to be in his thirties.

Briac had been vague in describing the Dreads’ purpose for being there, but they were, apparently, to oversee the taking of oaths. Briac, who showed deference to almost no one, seemed strangely respectful toward the Big Dread. The apprentices had decided a Dread was a kind of judge of Seeker training, with a history at which they were forced to guess, since their instructors gave no more than hints.

If the Young Dread was indeed fourteen, she was short for her age. Her body was slender to the point of looking underfed, but her muscles told a different story. They were like delicate ropes of steel holding together her small frame. She had hair of an unremarkable dishwater brown, but it was thick and hung almost to her waist. It

looked as though it had never been cut and had rarely been brushed, as though she'd received all her grooming advice from the Big Dread, who obviously knew nothing about raising girls.

She walked toward them with the strange gait shared by both Dreads. Her movements seemed slow, almost stately, like a ballet dancer during a particularly sad or serious part of the performance. And then, without warning, she would move at an entirely different speed. As they watched, there was a bird call from the meadow, and the Young Dread's head whipped around, almost too fast for their eyes to follow the motion. When she had identified the source of the noise, she continued on her way, as steady and fluid as a marble sculpture brought to life.

"Watch this," Quin whispered, so softly that John could barely hear her, though his head was still only inches from hers. Silently, she pulled her knife from her waistband. She waited until the Dread had walked into a patch of sunlight that would make her momentarily blind to motion in the shadows. Then Quin drew back her arm and threw the knife at the Young Dread as hard as she could.

The blade arced through the shadows expertly, aimed just ahead of where the Dread was walking, so she would carry herself straight into its path and it would impale the side of her head.

Yet that was not what happened.

The Young Dread continued her steady approach until the weapon was almost upon her. Then her whole body exploded into action. Her right arm whipped forward and caught the knife out of the air. She spun around so quickly, she almost appeared to blur against the forest backdrop, and she released the blade back toward them much like a thundercloud releases a bolt of lightning. It was propelled at such high speed that they could hear it whistling through the air, and both John and Quin ducked.

It made a perfect arc from the Dread, around the edge of the

cluster of trees, and buried itself to the hilt just inches from where Quin's hand still rested against the tree trunk. The vibration of its impact traveled all the way down the tree, and John could feel it in his feet.

"Nice shot," Quin called, waving at the girl. "Maybe you'll teach me how to do that sometime."

The Dread's eyes traveled slowly over their hiding spot, almost as if she were examining them minutely, even from that distance. Something about her gaze made them uncomfortable, and instinctively Quin and John moved a step away from each other, as though their intimacy could not survive her fierce stare. The Young Dread looked as if she might say something, but she never got the chance.

There was a new noise above the forest. The Dread and Quin and John looked up to see an aircar, throwing off a low vibration, circling to land in the commons. An aircar was such a rare sight on the estate that even the Dread stared at the vehicle for several seconds before turning away and resuming her steady walk.

John and Quin hurried to the edge of the meadow in time to see a man get out of the car and head toward Briac's cottage on the far side of the commons. When John caught sight of the man, he began to run, sticking to the trees but moving quickly, trying to get a better view.

Quin caught up with him. "What is it?"

The visitor turned for a moment, looking around the estate. John stopped running. Was he imagining things? The man's face looked familiar. But sometimes, when he was on the estate for months at a time, far from London and crowds, he found that every new face looked familiar.

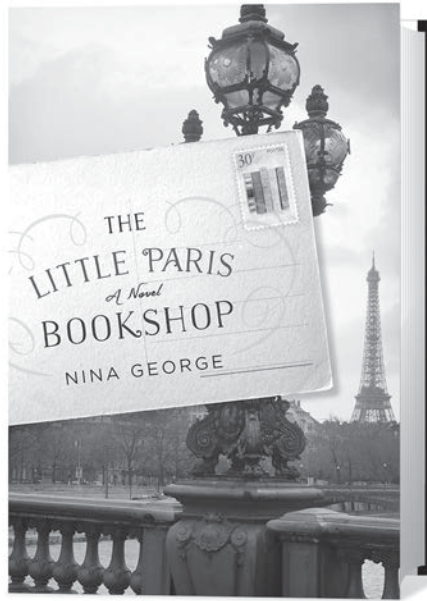
"I don't know," he said. "Do you think you can find out who he is?"

"I'm sure Briac will tell us if it's important."

“I’m not,” John said quietly. He glanced at Quin and said mischievously, “But if eavesdropping makes you nervous . . .”

“Nervous?” She pushed him indignantly, and he was pleased to notice her now studying the visitor with more interest. John wanted as few surprises as possible when it came to Briac. “Hmm,” she said. “I’ll come find you if I learn anything.” She kissed John lightly on the lips. “I know Briac will do right by you tonight. He’ll say something harsh, but he’s not going to stop your training. Of course not.”

With that, she ran ahead of him, toward the cottages. John could already feel himself bracing for the coming confrontation with Briac. He watched Quin go, her dark hair swinging, her body graceful—but not the slow grace of the Young Dread. Quin was full of life.



*Perfect for readers of The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel
Pie Society, The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry,
and 84, Charing Cross Road.*



Monsieur Perdu calls himself a literary apothecary. From his floating bookstore in a barge on the Seine, he prescribes novels for the hardships of life. Using his intuitive feel for the exact book a reader needs, Perdu mends broken hearts and souls. The only person he can't seem to heal through literature is himself; he's still haunted by heartbreak after his great love disappeared. She left him with only a letter, which he has never opened.

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1



How on earth could I have let them talk me into it?

The two generals of number 27 Rue Montagnard—Madame Bernard, the owner, and Madame Rosalette, the concierge—had caught Monsieur in a pincer movement between their ground-floor flats.

“That Le P. has treated his wife shamelessly.”

“Scandalously. Like a moth treats a wedding veil.”

“You can hardly blame some people when you look at their wives. Fridges in Chanel. But men? Monsters, all of them.”

“Ladies, I don’t quite know what . . .”

“Not you of course, Monsieur Perdu. You are cashmere compared with the normal yarn from which men are spun.”

“Anyway, we’re getting a new tenant. On the fourth floor. Yours, Monsieur.”

“But Madame has nothing left. Absolutely nothing, only shattered illusions. She needs just about everything.”

“And that’s where you come in, Monsieur. Give whatever you can. All donations welcome.”

“Of course. Maybe a good book . . .”

“Actually, we were thinking of something more practical. A table, perhaps. You know, Madame has—”

“Nothing. I got that.”

The bookseller could not imagine what might be more practical than a book, but he promised to give the new tenant a table. He still had one.

. . .

MONSIEUR PERDU pushed his tie between the top buttons of his white, vigorously ironed shirt and carefully rolled up his sleeves. Inward, one fold at a time, up to the elbow. He stared at the bookcase in the corridor. Behind the shelves lay a room he hadn't entered for almost twenty-one years.

Twenty-one years and summers and New Year's mornings.

But in that room was the table.

He exhaled, groped indiscriminately for a book and pulled Orwell's 1984 out of the bookcase. It didn't fall apart. Nor did it bite his hand like an affronted cat.

He took out the next novel, then two more. Now he reached into the shelf with both hands, grabbed whole parcels of books out of it and piled them up beside him.

The stacks grew into trees. Towers. Magic mountains. He looked at the last book in his hand. *When the Clock Struck Thirteen*. A tale of time travel.

If he'd believed in omens, this would have been a sign.

He banged the bottom of the shelves with his fists to loosen them from their fastenings. Then he stepped back.

There. Layer by layer, it appeared. Behind the wall of words. The door to the room where . . .

I could simply buy a table.

Monsieur Perdu ran his hand over his mouth. Yes. Dust down the books, put them away again, forget about the door. Buy a table and carry on as he had for the last two decades. In twenty years' time he'd be seventy, and from there he'd make it through the rest. Maybe he'd die prematurely.

Coward.

He tightened his trembling fist on the door handle.

Slowly the tall man opened the door. He pushed it softly inward, screwed up his eyes and . . .

Nothing but moonlight and dry air. He breathed it in through his nose, analyzing it, but found nothing.

—’s *smell has gone*.

Over the course of twenty-one summers, Monsieur Perdu had become as adept at avoiding thinking of — as he was at stepping around open manholes.

He mainly thought of her as —. As a pause amid the hum of his thoughts, as a blank in the pictures of the past, as a dark spot amid his feelings. He was capable of conjuring all kinds of gaps.

Monsieur Perdu looked around. How quiet the room seemed. And pale despite the lavender-blue wallpaper. The passing of the years behind the closed door had squeezed the color from the walls.

The light from the corridor met little that could cast a shadow. A bistro chair. The kitchen table. A vase with the lavender stolen two decades earlier from the Valensole plateau. And a fifty-year-old man who now sat down on the chair and wrapped his arms around himself.

There had once been curtains, and over there, pictures, flowers and books, a cat called Castor that slept on the sofa. There were candlesticks and whispering, full wineglasses and music. Dancing shadows on the wall, one of them tall, the other strikingly beautiful. There had been love in this room.

Now there’s only me.

He clenched his fists and pressed them against his burning eyes.

Monsieur Perdu swallowed and swallowed again to fight back the tears. His throat was too tight to breathe and his back seemed to glow with heat and pain.

When he could once more swallow without it hurting, Monsieur Perdu stood up and opened the casement window. Aromas came swirling in from the back courtyard.

The herbs from the Goldenbergs’ little garden. Rosemary and thyme mixed with the massage oils used by Che, the blind chiropodist and “foot whisperer.” Added to that, the smell of pancakes intermingled with Kofi’s spicy and meaty African barbecued dishes. Over

it all drifted the perfume of Paris in June, the fragrance of lime blossom and expectation.

But Monsieur Perdu wouldn't let these scents affect him. He resisted their charms. He'd become extremely good at ignoring anything that might in any way arouse feelings of yearning. Aromas. Melodies. The beauty of things.

He fetched soap and water from the storeroom next to the bare kitchen and began to clean the wooden table.

He fought off the blurry picture of himself sitting at this table, not alone but with —.

He washed and scrubbed and ignored the piercing question of what he was meant to do now that he had opened the door to the room in which all his love, his dreams and his past had been buried.

Memories are like wolves. You can't lock them away and hope they leave you alone.

Monsieur Perdu carried the narrow table to the door and heaved it through the bookcase, past the magic mountains of paper onto the landing and over to the apartment across the hall.

As he was about to knock, a sad sound reached his ears.

Stifled sobbing, as if through a cushion.

Someone was crying behind the green door.

A woman. And she was crying as though she wanted nobody, absolutely nobody, to hear.

2



“SHE WAS married to You-Know-Who, Monsieur Le P.”
He didn’t know. Perdu didn’t read the Paris gossip pages.

Madame Catherine Le P.-You-Know-Who had come home late one Thursday evening from her husband’s art agency, where she took care of his PR. Her key no longer fit into the lock, and there was a suitcase on the stairs with divorce papers on top of it. Her husband had moved to an unknown address and taken the old furniture and a new woman with him.

Catherine, soon-to-be-ex-wife-of-Le-Dirty-Swine, possessed nothing but the clothes she had brought into their marriage—and the realization that it had been naïve of her to think that their erstwhile love would guarantee decent treatment after their separation, and to assume that she knew her husband so well that he could no longer surprise her.

“A common mistake,” Madame Bernard, the lady of the house, had pontificated in between puffing out smoke signals from her pipe. “You only really get to know your husband when he walks out on you.”

Monsieur Perdu had not yet seen the woman who’d been so coldheartedly ejected from her own life.

Now he listened to the lonely sobs she was desperately trying to muffle, perhaps with her hands or a tea towel. Should he announce his presence and embarrass her? He decided to fetch the vase and the chair first.

He tiptoed back and forth between his flat and hers. He knew

how treacherous this proud old house could be, which floorboards squeaked, which walls were more recent and thinner additions and which concealed ducts that acted like megaphones.

When he pored over his eighteen-thousand-piece map of the world jigsaw in the otherwise empty living room, the sounds of the other residents' lives were transmitted to him through the fabric of the house.

The Goldenbergs' arguments (Him: "Can't you just for once . . . ? Why are you . . . ? Haven't I . . . ?" Her: "You always have to . . . You never do . . . I want you to . . .") He'd known the two of them as newlyweds. They'd laughed together a lot back then. Then came the children, and the parents drifted apart like continents.

He heard Clara Violette's electric wheelchair rolling over carpet edges, wooden floors and doorsills. He remembered the young pianist back when she was able to dance.

He heard Che and young Kofi cooking. Che was stirring the pots. The man had been blind since birth, but he said that he could see the world through the fragrant trails and traces that people's feelings and thoughts had left behind. Che could sense whether a room had been loved or lived or argued in.

Perdu also listened every Sunday to how Madame Bomme and the widows' club giggled like girls at the dirty books he slipped them behind their stuffy relatives' backs.

The snatches of life that could be overheard in the house at number 27 Rue Montagnard were like a sea lapping the shores of Perdu's silent isle.

He had been listening for more than twenty years. He knew his neighbors so well that he was sometimes amazed by how little they knew about him (not that he minded). They had no idea that he owned next to no furniture apart from a bed, a chair and a clothes rail—no knickknacks, no music, no pictures or photo albums or three-piece suite or crockery (other than for himself)—or that he had chosen such simplicity of his own free will. The two rooms he still occupied were so empty that they echoed when he coughed. The only thing in the

living room was the giant jigsaw puzzle on the floor. His bedroom was furnished with a bed, the ironing board, a reading light and a garment rail on wheels containing three identical sets of clothing: gray trousers, white shirt, brown V-neck sweater. In the kitchen were a stove-top coffee pot, a tin of coffee and a shelf stacked with food. Arranged in alphabetical order. Maybe it was just as well that no one saw this.

And yet he harbored a strange affection for 27 Rue Montagnard's residents. He felt inexplicably better when he knew that they were well—and in his unassuming way he tried to make a contribution. Books were a means of helping. Otherwise he stayed in the background, a small figure in a painting, while life was played out in the foreground.

However, the new tenant on the third floor, Maximilian Jordan, wouldn't leave Monsieur Perdu in peace. Jordan wore specially made earplugs with earmuffs over them, plus a woolly hat on cold days. Ever since the young author's debut novel had made him famous amid great fanfare, he'd been on the run from fans who would have given their right arms to move in with him. Meanwhile, Jordan had developed a peculiar interest in Monsieur Perdu.

While Perdu was on the landing arranging the chair beside the kitchen table, and the vase on top, the crying stopped.

In its place he heard the squeak of a floorboard that someone was trying to walk across without making it creak.

He peered through the pane of frosted glass in the green door. Then he knocked twice, very gently.

A face moved closer. A blurred, bright oval.

"Yes?" the oval whispered.

"I've got a chair and a table for you."

The oval said nothing.

I have to speak softly to her. She's cried so much she's probably all dried out and she'll crumble if I'm too loud.

"And a vase. For flowers. Red flowers, for instance. They'd look really pretty on the white table."

He had his cheek almost pressed up against the glass.

He whispered, "But I can give you a book as well."

The light in the staircase went out.

"What kind of book?" the oval whispered.

"The consoling kind."

"I need to cry some more. I'll drown if I don't. Can you understand that?"

"Of course. Sometimes you're swimming in unwept tears and you'll go under if you store them up inside." *And I'm at the bottom of a sea of tears.* "I'll bring you a book for crying then."

"When?"

"Tomorrow. Promise me you'll have something to eat and drink before you carry on crying."

He didn't know why he was taking such liberties. It must be something to do with the door between them.

The glass misted up with her breath.

"Yes," she said. "Yes."

When the hall light flared on again, the oval shrank back.

Monsieur Perdu laid his hand briefly on the glass where her face had been a second before.

And if she needs anything else, a chest of drawers or a potato peeler, I'll buy it and claim I had it already.

He went into his empty flat and pushed the bolt across. The door leading into the room behind the bookcase was still open. The longer Monsieur Perdu looked in there, the more it seemed as though the summer of 1992 were rising up out of the floor. The cat jumped down from the sofa on soft, velvet paws and stretched. The sunlight caressed a bare back, the back turned and became —. She smiled at Monsieur Perdu, rose from her reading position and walked toward him naked, with a book in her hand.

"Are you finally ready?" asked —.

Monsieur Perdu slammed the door.

No.

3



“NO,” MONSIEUR Perdu said again the following morning. “I’d rather not sell you this book.”

Gently he pried *Night* from the lady’s hand. Of the many novels on his book barge—the vessel moored on the Seine that he had named *Literary Apothecary*—she had inexplicably chosen the notorious bestseller by Maximilian “Max” Jordan, the earmuff wearer from the third floor in Rue Montagnard.

The customer looked at the bookseller, taken aback.

“Why not?”

“Max Jordan doesn’t suit you.”

“Max Jordan doesn’t suit me?”

“That’s right. He’s not your type.”

“My type. Okay. Excuse me, but maybe I should point out to you that I’ve come to your book barge for a book. Not a husband, *mon cher* Monsieur.”

“With all due respect, what you read is more important in the long term than the man you marry, *ma chère* Madame.”

She looked at him through eyes like slits.

“Give me the book, take my money, and we can both pretend it’s a nice day.”

“It is a nice day, and tomorrow is the start of summer, but you’re not going to get this book. Not from me. May I suggest a few others?”

“Right, and flog me some old classic you’re too lazy to throw

overboard where it can poison the fish?” She spoke softly to begin with, but her volume kept increasing.

“Books aren’t eggs, you know. Simply because a book has aged a bit doesn’t mean it’s gone bad.” There was now an edge to Monsieur Perdu’s voice too. “What is wrong with old? Age isn’t a disease. We all grow old, even books. But are you, is *anyone*, worth less, or less *important*, because they’ve been around for longer?”

“It’s absurd how you’re twisting everything, all because you don’t want me to have that stupid *Night* book.”

The customer—or rather noncustomer—tossed her purse into her luxury shoulder bag and tugged at the zip, which got stuck.

Perdu felt something welling up inside him, a wild feeling, anger, tension—only it had nothing to do with this woman. He couldn’t hold his tongue, though. He hurried after her as she strode angrily through the belly of the book barge and called out to her in the half-light between the long bookshelves: “It’s your choice, Madame! You can leave and spit on me. Or you can spare yourself thousands of hours of torture starting right now.”

“Thanks, that’s exactly what I’m doing.”

“Surrender to the treasures of books instead of entering into pointless relationships with men, who neglect you anyway, or going on crazy diets because you’re not thin enough for one man and not stupid enough for the next.”

She stood stock-still by the large bay window that looked out over the Seine, and glared at Perdu. “How dare you!”

“Books keep stupidity at bay. And vain hopes. And vain men. They undress you with love, strength and knowledge. It’s love from within. Make your choice: book or . . .”

Before he could finish his sentence, a Parisian pleasure boat plowed past with a group of Chinese women standing by the railing under umbrellas. They began clicking away with their cameras when they caught sight of Paris’s famous floating *Literary Apothecary*. The pleasure boat drove brown-green dunes of water against the bank, and the book barge reeled.

The customer teetered on her smart high heels, but instead of offering her his hand, Perdu handed her *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*.

She made an instinctive grab for the novel and clung to it.

Perdu held on to the book as he spoke to the stranger in a soothing, tender and calm voice.

“You need your own room. Not too bright, with a kitten to keep you company. And this book, which you will please read slowly, so you can take the occasional break. You’ll do a lot of thinking and probably a bit of crying. For yourself. For the years. But you’ll feel better afterward. You’ll know that now you don’t have to die, even if that’s how it feels because the guy didn’t treat you well. And you will like yourself again and won’t find yourself ugly or naïve.”

Only after delivering these instructions did he let go.

The customer stared at him. He knew from her shocked look that he had hit the target and got through to her. Pretty much a bull’s-eye.

Then she dropped the book.

“You’re completely nuts,” she whispered before spinning on her heel and tottering off, head down, through the boat’s book-filled belly and out onto the embankment.

Monsieur Perdu picked up the *Hedgehog*. The book’s spine had been damaged by the fall. He would have to offer Muriel Barbery’s novel for a euro or two to one of the *bouquinistes* on the embankment with their boxes of books for people to rummage through.

Then he gazed after the customer. How she fought her way through the strolling crowds. How her shoulders shook in her suit.

She was crying. She was weeping like someone who knows that this small drama is not going to break her, but is nonetheless deeply hurt by the injustice of the here and now. She had already suffered one cruel, deep blow. Wasn’t that enough? Did this nasty bookseller really need to rub salt in her wound?

Monsieur Perdu suspected that on her personal idiot scale of one to ten, she ranked him—the paper tiger idiot on his stupid *Literary Apothecary*—about a twelve.

He agreed with her. His outburst and his high-handed tone must

somehow be related to the previous night and to the room. He was usually more sanguine.

He was generally unperturbed by his customers' wishes, insults or peculiarities. He divided them into three categories. The first category comprised those for whom books were the only breath of fresh air in their claustrophobic daily lives. His favorite customers. They were confident he would tell them what they needed. Or they confided their vulnerabilities to him, for example: "No novels with mountains, elevators or views in them, please—I'm scared of heights." Some of them sang Monsieur Perdu children's tunes, or rather growled them: "Mm-hmm, mmh, dadada—know that one?" in the hope that the great bookseller would remember for them and give them a book featuring the melodies of their childhood. And most of the time he did know a book to match the songs. There had been a time when he sang a lot.

The second category of customers came aboard *Lulu*, the original name of his book barge in the Port des Champs-Élysées, because they had been lured there by the name of the bookshop: *la pharmacie littéraire*, the *Literary Apothecary*.

They came to buy wacky postcards ("Reading kills prejudice" or "People who read don't lie—at least not at the same time") or miniature books in brown medicine bottles, or to take photos.

Yet these people were downright entertaining compared with the third kind, who thought they were kings but, unfortunately, lacked the manners of royalty. Without saying "Bonjour" or so much as looking at him as they handled every book with fingers greasy from the french fries they'd been eating, they asked Perdu in a reproachful tone: "Don't you have any Band-Aids with poems on them? Or crime-series toilet paper? Why don't you stock inflatable travel pillows? Now that would be a useful thing for a book pharmacy to have."

Perdu's mother, Lirabelle Bernier, formerly Perdu, had urged him to sell rubbing alcohol and compression stockings—women of a certain age got heavy legged when they sat reading.

Some days he sold more stockings than literature.

He sighed.

Why was such an emotionally vulnerable woman so eager to read *Night*?

All right, it wouldn't have done her any harm.

Well, not much.

The newspaper *Le Monde* had feted the novel and Max Jordan as “the new voice of rebellious youth.” The women’s magazines had worked themselves into a frenzy over the “boy with the hungry heart” and had printed photo portraits of the author bigger than the book’s cover. Max Jordan always looked somewhat bemused in these pictures.

Bemused and bruised, thought Perdu.

Jordan’s debut novel was full of men who, out of fear for their individuality, responded to love with nothing but hatred and cynical indifference. One critic had celebrated *Night* as the “manifesto of a new masculinity.”

Perdu thought it was something a bit less pretentious. It was a rather desperate attempt by a young man who was in love for the first time to take stock of his inner life. The young man cannot understand how he can lose all self-control and start loving and then, just as mystifyingly, stop again. How unsettling it is for him to be unable to decide whom he loves and who loves him, where it begins and where it ends, and all the terribly unpredictable things in between.

Love, the dictator whom men find so terrifying. No wonder that men, being men, generally greet this tyrant by running away. Millions of women read the book to find out why men were so cruel to them. Why they changed the locks, dumped them by text, slept with their best friends. All to thumb their nose at the great dictator: *See, you’re not going to get me. No, not me.*

But was the book really of any comfort to these women?

Night had been translated into twenty-nine languages. They’d even sold it to Belgium, as Rosalette the concierge had been keen to note. As a Frenchwoman born and raised, she liked to point out that you could never know with the Belgians.

Max Jordan had moved into 27 Rue Montagnard seven weeks

ago, opposite the Goldenbergs on the third floor. He hadn't yet been tracked down by any of the fans who pursued him with love letters, phone calls and lifelong pledges. There was even a *Night* Wikiforum, where they swapped their news and views about his ex-girlfriends (unknown, the big question being: was Jordan a virgin?), his eccentric habits (wearing earmuffs) and his possible addresses (Paris, Antibes, London).

Perdu had seen his fair share of *Night* addicts in the *Literary Apothecary*. They'd come aboard wearing earmuffs and beseeching Monsieur Perdu to arrange a reading by their idol. When Perdu suggested this to his neighbor, the twenty-one-year-old had gone deathly pale. Stage fright, Perdu reckoned.

To him, Jordan was a young man on the run, a child who had been proclaimed a man of letters against his will—and surely, for many, a whistle-blower on men's emotional turmoil. There were even hate forums on the Web where anonymous posters ripped Jordan's novel apart, made fun of it and advised the author to do what the despairing character in his novel does when he realizes that he'll never be able to master love: he throws himself from a Corsican cliff top into the sea below.

The most fascinating things about *Night* were the author's descriptions of male frailties: he wrote about the inner life of men more honestly than any man had done before. He trampled on every one of literature's idealized and familiar images of men: the image of the “he-man,” the “emotional dwarf,” the “demented old man” and the “lone wolf.” A feminist magazine had given its review of Jordan's debut novel the appropriately mellow headline *MEN ARE HUMAN TOO*.

Jordan's daring impressed Perdu. Yet the novel still struck him as a kind of gazpacho that kept sloshing over the edge of the soup bowl. Its author was just as emotionally defenseless and unprotected: he was the positive print of Perdu's negative.

Perdu wondered how it must feel to experience things so intensely and yet survive.

4



NEXT PERDU served an Englishman who asked him, “I recently saw a book with a green-and-white jacket. Has it been translated?” Perdu figured out that it was a classic that had been published seventeen years back. He sold the man a collection of poetry instead. Afterward, he helped the deliveryman transfer the crates of books he had ordered from the handcart onto the boat, and then gathered a few recent children’s books for the somewhat frantic teacher from the elementary school on the other bank of the Seine.

Perdu wiped the nose of a little girl, who was absorbed with *The Golden Compass*. For the girl’s overworked mother, he wrote out a tax refund certificate for the thirty-volume encyclopedia she was buying in installments.

She gestured toward her daughter. “This strange child of mine wants to have read the entire thing before she turns twenty-one. Okay, I said, she can have the encyclo . . . encloped . . . oh, all these reference books, but she won’t be getting any more birthday presents. And nothing for Christmas either.”

Perdu acknowledged the seven-year-old girl with a nod. The child nodded earnestly back.

“Do you think that’s normal?” the mother asked anxiously. “At her age?”

“I think she’s brave, clever and right.”

“As long as she doesn’t turn out too smart for men.”

“For the stupid ones, she will, Madame. But who wants them anyway? A stupid man is every woman’s downfall.”

The mother looked up from her agitated, reddened hands in surprise.

“Why didn’t anyone ever tell me that?” she asked with the flicker of a smile.

“Do you know what?” said Perdu. “Pick a book you’d like to give your daughter for her birthday anyway. It’s discount day at the Apothecary: buy an encyclopedia and we’ll throw in a novel.”

The woman accepted his fib without blinking and sighed. “But my mother’s waiting for us outside. My mother says she wants to move into a retirement home and that I should stop taking care of her. But I can’t. Could you?”

“I’ll look after your mother. You look for a present, all right?”

The woman did as he said with a grateful smile.

Perdu brought a glass of water to the girl’s grandmother out on the embankment. She didn’t dare venture across the gangway.

Perdu was familiar with such distrust from elderly people; he had many customers over seventy whom he gave advice to on dry land, on the very same wrought-iron bench where the old lady was now sitting. The further life advanced, the more protective the elderly were of their good days: nothing should imperil the time they had left. That was why they no longer went on trips; why they felled the old trees outside their houses so they didn’t come crashing down onto their roofs; and why they no longer inched their way across a river on a five-millimeter-thick steel gangway. Perdu also brought the grandmother a magazine-sized book catalogue, with which she fanned herself against the summer heat. The elderly lady patted the seat beside her invitingly.

She reminded Perdu of his mother, Lirabelle. Maybe it was her eyes. They looked alert and intelligent. So he sat down. The Seine was sparkling, and the sky arched blue and summery overhead. The roaring and beeping of traffic drifted down from the Place de la Concorde; there was not a moment of silence. The city would empty a bit after July 14, when the Parisians set off to claim the coastline and the

mountains for the duration of the summer holidays. Yet even then the city would be loud and voracious.

“Do you do this too sometimes?” the grandmother suddenly asked. “Check on old photos to see whether the faces of the deceased show any inkling that they will soon die?”

Monsieur Perdu shook his head. “No.”

With trembling fingers dotted with liver spots, the lady opened the locket on her necklace.

“This is my husband. Taken two weeks before he collapsed. And then, all of a sudden, there you are, a young woman in an empty room.”

She ran her index finger over her husband’s picture and tapped him gently on the nose.

“How relaxed he looks. As if all his plans could come true. We look into a camera and think it will all carry on and on, but then: *bonjour*, eternal rest”

She paused. “I for one don’t let anyone take photos of me anymore,” she said. She turned her face to the sun. “Do you have a book about dying?”

“Many, in fact,” said Perdu. “About growing old, about contracting an incurable disease, about dying slowly, quickly, alone somewhere on the floor of a hospital ward.”

“I’ve often wondered why people don’t write more books about living. Anyone can die. But living?”

“You’re right, Madame. There is so much to say about living. Living with books, living with children, living for beginners.”

“Write one then.”

As if I could give anyone any advice.

“I’d rather write an encyclopedia about common emotions,” he admitted. “From A for ‘Anxiety about picking up hitchhikers’ to E for ‘Early risers’ smugness’ through to Z for ‘Zealous toe concealment, or the fear that the sight of your feet might destroy someone’s love for you.’”

Perdu wondered why he was telling a stranger all this.

If only he hadn't opened the room.

The grandmother patted his knee. He gave a quick shudder: physical contact was dangerous.

"An encyclopedia of emotions," she repeated with a smile. "I know that feeling about toes. An almanac of common feelings . . . Do you know the German writer Erich Kästner?"

Perdu nodded. In 1936, shortly before Europe sank into the black-and-brown gloom, Kästner had published a *Lyrical Medicine Chest* from the poetic medicine cabinet of his works. "This volume is dedicated to the therapy of private life," wrote the poet in the foreword. "It addresses—mainly in homeopathic doses—the minor and major ailments of existence and helps with the 'treatment of the average inner life.'"

"Kästner was one reason I called my book barge the *Literary Apothecary*," said Perdu. "I wanted to treat feelings that are not recognized as afflictions and are never diagnosed by doctors. All those little feelings and emotions no therapist is interested in, because they are apparently too minor and intangible. The feeling that washes over you when another summer nears its end. Or when you recognize that you haven't got your whole life left to find out where you belong. Or the slight sense of grief when a friendship doesn't develop as you thought, and you have to continue your search for a lifelong companion. Or those birthday morning blues. Nostalgia for the air of your childhood. Things like that." He recalled his mother once confiding in him that she suffered from a pain for which there was no antidote. "There are women who only look at another woman's shoes and never at her face. And others who always look women in the face and only occasionally at their shoes." She preferred the second type; Lirabelle felt humiliated and misjudged by the former.

It was precisely to relieve such inexplicable yet real suffering that he had bought the boat, which was a working barge then and originally called *Lulu*; he had converted it with his own hands and filled it with books, the only remedy for countless, undefined afflictions of the soul.

“You should write it. An encyclopedia of emotions for literary pharmacists.” The old woman sat up straighter and grew more lively and animated. “Add ‘Confidence in strangers’ under C. The odd feeling you get in trains when you open up far more to someone you’ve never met than you ever have to your own family. And ‘Grandchildren comfort’ under G. That’s the sense that life goes on. . . .” She fell silent, far away.

“A zealous toe concealer—I was one. But he liked . . . he liked my feet after all.”

As the grandmother, mother and girl said their good-byes and went on their way, Perdu reflected that it was a common misconception that booksellers looked after books.

They look after people.

WHEN THE stream of customers abated around midday—eating was more sacred to the French than state, religion and money combined—Perdu swept the gangway with the stiff broom, disturbing a nest of bridge spiders. Then he saw Kafka and Lindgren sloping toward him beneath the avenue of trees that lined the embankment. Those were the names he’d given to the two stray cats that paid him daily visits on the basis of certain preferences they had developed. The gray tomcat with the white priest’s collar enjoyed sharpening his claws on Franz Kafka’s *Investigations of a Dog*, a fable that analyzes the human world from a dog’s perspective. On the other hand, orange-white, long-eared Lindgren liked to lie near the books about Pippi Longstocking; she was a fine-looking cat who peered out from the back of the bookshelves and scrutinized each visitor. Lindgren and Kafka would sometimes do Perdu a favor by dropping off one of the upper shelves without warning onto a third-category customer, one of the greasy-fingered type.

The two well-read strays waited until they could come aboard without fear of big, blundering feet. Once there, they rubbed themselves against the bookseller’s trouser legs, mewling gently.

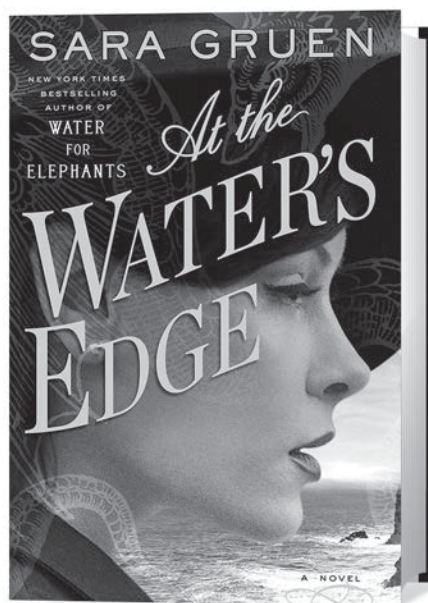
Monsieur Perdu stood totally still. Briefly, very briefly, he let down

his guard. He enjoyed the cats' warmth and their softness. For a few seconds he abandoned himself, eyes closed, to the unbelievably soothing sensation against his calves.

These near caresses were the only physical contact in Perdu's daily life.

The only ones he allowed.

The precious interlude ended when, behind the bookcase in which Perdu had arranged books against the five categories of urban misery (the hectic pace, the indifference, the heat, the noise and the ubiquitous sadistic bus drivers), someone could be heard having an infernal coughing fit.



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Prologue

Drumnadrochit, February 28, 1942

AGNES MÀIRI GRANT,
INFANT DAUGHTER OF ANGUS AND MÀIRI GRANT
JANUARY 14TH, 1942

CAPT. ANGUS DUNCAN GRANT,
BELOVED HUSBAND OF MÀIRI
APRIL 2ND, 1909–JANUARY , 1942

The headstone was modest and hewn of black granite, granite being one of the few things never in short supply in Glenurquhart, even during the present difficulty.

Màiri visited the tiny swell of earth that covered her daughter's coffin every day, watching as it flattened. Archie the Stonecutter had said it might be months before they could put up the stone with the frost so hard upon them, but the coffin was so small the leveling was accomplished in just a few weeks.

No sooner was the stone up than Màiri got the telegram about

Angus and had Archie take it away again. Archie had wanted to wait until the date of death was verified, but Màiri needed it done then, to have a place to mourn them both at once, and Archie could not say no. He chiseled Angus's name beneath his daughter's and left some room to add the day of the month when they learned it. An addition for an absence, because Angus—unlike the wee bairn—was not beneath it and almost certainly never would be.

There were just the two of them in the churchyard when Archie returned the headstone. He was a strong man, heaving a piece of granite around like that.

A shadow flashed over her, and she looked up. A single crow circled high above the graves, never seeming to move its wings.

One Crow for sorrow,

It was joined by another, and then two more.

Two Crows for mirth,

Three Crows for a wedding,

Four Crows for a birth

Archie removed his hat and twisted it in his hands.

“If there's anything Morag and I can do, anything at all . . .”

Màiri tried to smile, and succeeded only in producing a half-choked sob. She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and pressed it to her mouth.

Archie paused as though he wanted to say more. Eventually he replaced his hat and said, “Well then. I'll be off.” He nodded firmly and trudged back to his van.

It was Willie the Postie who had delivered the telegram, on Valentine's Day no less, a month to the day after the birth. Màiri had been pulling a pint behind the bar when Anna came, ashen-faced, whispering that Willie was on the doorstep, and would not come inside. Willie was a regular, so Màiri knew from that very moment, before she even approached the door and saw his face. His hooded eyes stared into hers, and then drifted down to the envelope in his hands. He

turned it a couple of times, as though wondering whether to give it to her, whether *not* giving it to her would make the thing it contained not true. The wind caught it a couple of times, flicking it this way and that. When he finally handed it to her, he offered it up as gently as a new-hatched chick. She opened it, turned it right side up, and let her eyes scan the purple date stamp—February 14th, 1942—added by Willie himself not half an hour before, and then

MRS MAIRI GRANT 6 HIGH ROAD DRUM INVERNESS-SHIRE
DEEPLY REGRET TO INFORM THAT YOUR HUSBAND CAPTN ANGUS D
GRANT SEAFORTH HRS 4TH BTN 179994 IS MISSING PRESUMED
KILLED ON WAR SERVICE JAN 1 1942 LETTER WITH DETAILS TO
FOLLOW

She took in only three things: Angus, killed, the date. And they were enough.

“I’m sorry, Màiri,” Willie said in a near whisper. “Especially so soon after . . .” His voice trailed off. He blinked, and his eyes drifted down, pausing briefly on her belly before coming to rest again on his hands.

She could not reply. She closed the door quietly, walked past the hushed locals and into the kitchen. There she leaned against the wall, clutching her empty womb with one hand and the piece of paper that had brought Angus’s death in the other. For it did seem as though it was the paper that brought his death rather than simply the news of it. He had been dead for more than six weeks, and she hadn’t known.

In the time between the arrival of the telegram and the return of the headstone with Angus’s name on it, Màiri had begun to blame Willie. Why had he chosen to hand her the telegram? She had seen his hesitation. He would have been complicit in what, at worst, would have been a lie of omission, especially if it meant she could believe that Angus was still out there somewhere. Even if he was doing things she couldn’t comprehend, things that might change him in the terrible ways the men who had already been sent home had been changed,

she could believe he was alive and therefore fixable, for surely there was nothing she couldn't love him through once he came home.

They had lied to her about the baby, and she had let them.

Since she had first felt the baby quicken, she was keenly aware of its every movement. For months, she had watched in wonderment as little braes poked up from her belly, pushing their way across—an elbow, or perhaps a knee—a subterranean force that constantly rearranged the landscape of her flesh. Was it a boy, or a wee girl? Whichever it was, it already had strong opinions. She remembered the moment it occurred to her that it had been hours since she felt it move, on Hogmanay, of all days. At midnight, precisely when Ian Mackintosh struck in his pipes to form the first chord of “Auld Lang Syne” and seconds before corresponding shots rang out from the doorway of Donnie Maclean, Màiri began poking her belly, trying to wake it, for they said that unborn babes slept. She yelled at it, screamed at it, and finally, realizing, wrapped her arms around it and wept. Thirteen days later, her pains started.

Her memories of the birth were vague, for the midwife had given her bitter tea mixed with white powder, and the doctor held ether over her nose and mouth at regular intervals, putting her under completely at the end. They told her the baby had lived a few minutes, long enough to be baptized. Their lie became her lie, and that was what went on the headstone. In truth, she'd probably lost both child and husband on the same date.

The promised letter never arrived. Where had he died? *How* had he died? Without the dreaded details, she had only her imagination—her terrible imagination—and while she wished she couldn't fathom what his last moments might have been, she could, with distinct and agonizing precision, in a million different ways. Please God that they were moments indeed, and not hours or days.

The murder of crows descended in a noisy fluster, settling in a row on the stone wall, huddling into themselves, their blue-black feathers puffed and their heads tucked in as though they'd pulled up their coat

collars. They stared accusingly, miserably, but without their usual commentary. Màiri counted them twice.

Seven for a secret, never to be told.

She knew then that she would never know the details, would never know what had happened.

A bone-chilling wind stirred the fallen leaves until they formed cyclones that danced among the graves. Màiri crouched and fingered the names of her child and husband in the black stone.

Agnes.

Angus.

A third of the stone was still blank, at the bottom. There was room for one more name, one more set of dates, and these would be accurate.

She stood without taking her eyes off the stone. She wiped her eyes and nose on the handkerchief, and kept it in her hand as she wrapped her arms around herself and walked through the black iron gate, leaving it swinging. She headed toward the inn, except when she got to the crossroad, she turned left instead of going straight.

A light snow began to fall, but despite her bare head and legs she trudged right past the Farquhars' croft. She'd have been welcome there, as well as at the McKenzies', where she could see the fire glowing orange through the window, but on she went, teeth chattering, hands and shins numb.

Eventually the castle rose on her left, its majestic and ruined battlements like so many broken teeth against the leaden sky. She had played within its walls as a child, and knew which rooms remained whole, where you had to watch your footing, where the best hiding places were, where the courting couples went. She and Angus had been among them.

The snow was heavier now, falling in clumps that collected and melted on her hair. Her ears were past stinging. She pulled her sleeves over her frozen hands and pinched them shut with her fingertips. Through the gatehouse, past the kiln, pushing through the long grass and scrub gorse, bracken, and thistles, straight to the Water Gate.

She paused at the top, staring at the blackness of the loch. Thou-

sands of tiny whitecaps danced on its surface, seeming to move in the opposite direction of the water beneath them. It was said that the loch contained more water than all the other bodies of water not just in Scotland but also in England and Wales combined, and it held other things as well. She had been warned away from it her entire life, for its depth came quickly, its coldness was fierce, and the Kelpie lay in wait.

She picked her way sideways down the slope, letting her icy fingers out of her sleeves to hold up the hem of her coat.

When she reached the bottom, the water lapped around the soles of her shoes. The edge of the loch looked seductively shallow, slipping over the gravel and back into itself. She took a step forward, gasping as the water flooded her shoes, so cold, so cold, and yet it had never frozen, not once in recorded history. Another step, another gasp. Bits of peat swirled in the water around her ankles, circling her legs, beckoning her forth. Another step, and this time she stumbled, finding herself knee-deep. Her wool coat floated, an absurd umbrella, first resisting and finally wicking water, pulling her deeper. She looked back at the landing, suddenly desperate. If only she had a hat, she could throw it back onto the thorny gorse. If she'd had anything that would float, maybe they'd think it was an accident and let her be buried with her daughter. Maybe they'd think the Kelpie took her. And then she remembered that the loch never gave up its dead, so she spread her arms wide and embraced it.

Chapter One

Scottish Highlands, January 14, 1945

“Oh God, make him pull over,” I said as the car slung around yet another curve in almost total darkness.

It had been nearly four hours since we’d left the naval base at Aultbea, and we’d been careening from checkpoint to checkpoint since. I truly believe those were the only times the driver used the brakes. At the last checkpoint, I was copiously sick, narrowly missing the guard’s boots. He didn’t even bother checking our papers, just lifted the red and white pole and waved us on with a look of disgust.

“Driver! Pull over,” said Ellis, who was sitting in the backseat between Hank and me.

“I’m afraid there is no ‘over,’” the driver said in a thick Highland accent, his *R*’s rolling magnificently. He came to a stop in the middle of the road.

It was true. If I stepped outside the car I would be ankle-deep in thorny vegetation and mud, not that it would have done any more to destroy my clothes and shoes. From head to toe I was steeped in sulfur and cordite and the stench of fear. My stockings were mere cobwebs stretched around my legs, and my scarlet nails were broken and peel-

ing. I hadn't had my hair done since the day before we'd sailed from the shipyard in Philadelphia. I had never been in such a state.

I leaned out the open door and gagged while Ellis rubbed my back. Wet snow collected on the top of my head.

I sat up again and pulled the door shut. "I'm sorry. I'm finished. Do you think you can take those things off the headlights? I think it would be better if I could see what's coming." I was referring to the slotted metal plates our one-eyed driver had clipped on before we'd left the base. They limited visibility to about three feet ahead of us.

"Can't," he called back cheerfully. "It's the Blackout." As he cranked up through the gears, my head lurched back and forth. I leaned over and cradled my face in my hands.

Ellis patted my shoulder. "We should be nearly there. Do you think fresh air would help?"

I sat up and let my head flop against the back of the torn leather seat. Ellis reached across and rolled the window down a crack. I turned toward the cold air and closed my eyes.

"Hank, can you *please* put out your cigarette?"

He didn't answer, but a whoosh of frigid air let me know he had tossed it out the window.

"Thank you," I said weakly.

Twenty minutes later, when the car finally came to a stop and the driver cut the engine, I was so desperate for solid ground I spilled out before the driver could get his own door open, never mind mine. I landed on my knees.

"Maddie!" Ellis said in alarm.

"I'm all right," I said.

There was a fast-moving cloud cover under a nearly full moon, and by its light I first laid eyes on our unlikely destination.

I climbed to my feet and reeled away from the car, thinking I might be sick again. My legs propelled me toward the building, spinning ever faster. I crashed into the wall, then slid down until I was crouching against it.

In the distance, a sheep bleated.

. . .

To say that I wished I wasn't there would be a ludicrous understatement, but I'd only ever had the illusion of choice:

We have to do this, Hank had said. *It's for Ellis.*

To refuse would have been tantamount to betrayal, an act of calculated cruelty. And so, because of my husband's war with his father and their insane obsession with a mythical monster, we'd crossed the Atlantic at the very same time a real madman, a real monster, was attempting to take over the world for his own reasons of ego and pride.

I would have given anything to go back two weeks, to the beginning of the New Year's Eve party, and script the whole thing differently.

Chapter Two

Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia, December 31, 1944

“**F**ive! Four! Three! Two!”

The word “one” had already formed on our lips, but before it could slide off there was an explosion overhead. As screams rose around us, I pitched myself against Ellis, tossing champagne over both of us. He threw an arm protectively around my head and didn’t spill a drop.

When the screams petered out, I heard a tinkling above us, like glass breaking, along with an ominous groaning. I peeked out from my position against Ellis’s chest.

“What the hell?” said Hank, without a hint of surprise. I think he was the only person in the room who hadn’t jumped.

All eyes turned upward. Thirty feet above us, a massive chandelier swung on its silver-plated chain, throwing shimmering prisms across the walls and floor. It was as if a rainbow had burst into a million pieces, which were now dancing across the marble, silks, and damask. We watched, transfixed. I glanced nervously at Ellis’s face, and then back at the ceiling.

An enormous cork landed next to General Pew, our host at what

was easily the most anticipated party of the year, bouncing outrageously like a bloated mushroom. A split second later a single crystal the size of a quail's egg fell from the sky and dropped smack into his cocktail, all but emptying it. He stared, bemused and tipsy, then calmly took out his handkerchief and dabbed his jacket.

As everyone burst into laughter, I noticed a footman in old-fashioned knee breeches perched near the top of a stepladder, pallid, motionless, struggling to contain the biggest bottle of champagne I'd ever seen. On the marble table in front of him was a structure of glasses arranged so that if someone poured continuously into the top one, they would eventually all be filled. As a rush of bubbles cascaded over the sides of the bottle and into the footman's sleeves, he stared in white-faced horror at Mrs. Pew.

Hank assessed the situation and apparently took pity on the fellow. He raised his glass, as well as his other hand, and with the flair and flourish of a ringmaster boomed, "*One! Happy New Year!*"

The orchestra struck up "Auld Lang Syne." General Pew conducted with his empty glass, and Mrs. Pew beamed at his side—not only was her party a smashing success, but it now had a comic anecdote people would speak of for years.

*Should auld acquaintance be forgot, and never brought to mind
Should auld acquaintance be forgot, and old lang syne . . .*

Those who knew the words sang along. I had refreshed my memory that afternoon in order to be ready for the big moment, but when cork met crystal, the lyrics were knocked straight out of my brain. By the time we got to running about slopes and picking daisies fine, I gave up and joined Ellis and Hank in la-la-la'ing our way through the rest.

They waved their glasses in solidarity with General Pew, their free arms looped around my waist. At the end, Ellis leaned in to kiss me.

Hank looked to one side, then the other, and appeared baffled.

"Hmm. I seem to have misplaced my date. What *have* I done with her?"

"What you *haven't* done is marry her," I said and then snorted,

nearly expelling champagne through my nose. I had sipped my way through at least four glasses on an empty stomach and was feeling bold.

His mouth opened in mock offense, but even he couldn't pretend ignorance about Violet's growing desperation at the seemingly endless nature of their courtship.

"Did she actually leave?" he said, scanning the room a little more seriously.

"I'm not sure," I said. "I haven't seen her in a while."

"Then who will give me my New Year's kiss?" he asked, looking bereft.

"Oh, come here, you big lug." I stood on tiptoe and planted a kiss on his cheek. "You've always got us. And we don't even require a ring."

Ellis threw us an amused side eye and motioned to Hank that he should wipe my lipstick off his cheek.

Beyond him, the footman was still balanced on the second to highest rung of the stepladder. He was bent at the waist, trying to aim the bottle at the top glass, and had gone from pale to purple with the effort. His mouth was pressed into a grim line. I looked around to see if reinforcements were coming and didn't see any.

"Ellis? I think he needs help," I said, tilting my head in the footman's direction.

Ellis glanced over. "You're right," he said, handing me his glass. "Hank? Shall we?"

"Do you really think she's left?" Hank said wistfully, his lips hovering near the edge of his glass. "She was a vision tonight. That dress was the color of the gloaming, the sequins jealous stars in the galaxy of her night, but nothing, *nothing* could compare to the milky skin of her—"

"Boys! Concentrate!" I said.

Hank snapped back to life. "What?"

"Maddie thinks that man needs help," said Ellis.

"That thing's enormous," I said. "I don't think he can hold it on his own."

“I should think not. That’s a Balthazar,” said Ellis.

“That’s not a Balthazar,” Hank said. “That’s a Nebuchadnezzar.”

The footman’s arms were quaking. He began pouring but missed. Champagne fell between the glasses, splashing onto the table and floor. His gloves and sleeves were saturated.

“Uh-oh,” said Hank.

“Uh-oh indeed,” said Ellis. “Mrs. Pew will *not* be pleased.”

“I rather suspect Mrs. Pew is never pleased,” Hank said.

Rivulets of sweat ran down the footman’s forehead. It was plain to see that he was going to fall forward, right onto the glasses. I looked to Mrs. Pew for help, but she had disappeared. I tried to signal the General, but he was holding court with a replenished cocktail.

I dug my elbow into Ellis’s side.

“Go!” I said urgently. “Go help him.”

“Who’s she talking about?” said Hank.

I glared at him, and then some more, until he remembered.

“Oh! Of course.” He tried to hand me his glass, but I was already holding two. He set his on the floor and yanked his lapels in a businesslike manner, but before he and Ellis could mobilize, help arrived in the form of other servants bearing four smaller but still very large bottles, and three more stepladders. Mrs. Pew glided in behind them to make sure all was under control.

“Now *those* are Balthazars,” said Hank, with a knowing nod. He retrieved his drink from the floor and drained it.

“No. Those are Jeroboams,” said Ellis.

“I think I know my champagne,” said Hank.

“And I don’t?”

“I think you’re both wrong. Those are Ebenezers,” I said.

That stopped them.

I broke into tippy giggles. “Ebenezer? Get it? Christmas? The holidays? Oh never mind. Someone get me another. I spilled mine.”

“Yes. On *me*,” said Ellis.

Hank spun around and set his glass on the tray of a passing waiter. He clapped his hands. “All right, who’s up for a snowball fight?”

We toppled outside and made snow angels right there in front of the Pews' home and all the cars and liveried drivers that were lined up waiting for guests. I gathered one snowball and managed to land it on Ellis's chest before screeching and running back inside.

In the vast foyer, Ellis helped brush the snow off my back and hair. Hank hung his jacket over my bare shoulders, and the two of them guided me to a trio of ornate, embroidered chairs near a roaring fire. Hank, who had had the presence of mind to grab my mink stole on the way back in, shook it off and draped it over the edge of the rosewood table in front of us. Ellis went in search of hot toddies, and I peeled off my gloves, which were stained and soaked.

"God, look at me," I said, gazing down at myself. "I'm a mess."

My silk dress and shoes were ruined. I tried in vain to smooth out the water spots, and checked quickly to make sure I still had both earrings. The gloves were of no consequence, but I hoped the stole could be saved. If not, I'd succeeded in destroying my entire outfit.

"You're not a mess. You're magnificent," said Hank.

"Well, I *was*," I lamented.

I'd spent the afternoon at Salon Antoine having my hair and makeup done, and had eaten almost nothing for two days before so my dress would drape properly. It was a beautiful pomegranate-red silk, the same material as my shoes. It matched my ruby engagement ring, and all of it set off my green eyes. Ellis had given me the dress and shoes a few days earlier, and before the party I had presented myself to him like a flamenco dancer, twirling so the skirt would take flight. He professed his delight, but I felt a familiar pang of sorrow as I tried, yet again, to imagine exactly what he was seeing. My husband was profoundly color-blind, so to him my ensemble must have been a combination of grays. I wondered which ones, and how many variations there were, and whether they had different depths. I couldn't imagine a world without color.

Hank dropped into a chair, leaving one leg dangling over its arm. He pulled his bow tie open and undid his cuffs and collar. He looked like a half-drowned Clark Gable.

I shivered into his jacket, holding it closed from the inside.

Hank patted his chest and sides. He stopped suddenly and lifted an eyebrow.

“Oh!” I said, realizing what he was looking for. I retrieved the cigarette case from his inside pocket and handed it to him. He flipped it open and held it out in offering. I shook my head. He took a cigarette for himself and snapped the case shut.

“So, how about it then?” he said, his eyes glistening playfully. “Shall we go get us a monster?”

“Sure,” I said, waving my hand. “We’ll hop on the next liner.” It was what I always said when the topic came up, which was often, and always after boatloads of booze. It was our little game.

“I think getting away would do Ellis good. He seems depressed.”

“Ellis isn’t depressed,” I said. “You just want to escape Violet’s clutches.”

“I do not,” he protested.

“You didn’t even notice when she left tonight!”

Hank cocked his head and nodded, conceding the point. “I suppose I should send flowers.”

“First thing in the morning,” I said.

He nodded. “Absolutely. At the crack of noon. Scout’s honor.”

“*And* I think you should marry her. You need civilizing, and I need a female friend. I have only you and Ellis.”

He clutched a hand to his heart, mortally wounded. “What are we, chopped liver?”

“Only the finest foie gras. Seriously, though. How long are you going to make her wait?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t know if I’m ready to be civilized yet. But when I am, Violet can have the honors. She can pick a mean set of china.”

As I set my drink down, I caught another glimpse of my dress and shoes. “I think maybe *I* need civilizing. Will you just marry her already?”

“What is this, an ambush?” He tapped the cigarette against the

top of the case and put it between his lips. A servant appeared from nowhere to light it.

“Mm, thanks,” Hank said, inhaling. He leaned back and let smoke drift from his mouth to his nose in a swirling white ribbon that he re-inhaled. He called this maneuver the “Irish Waterfall.”

“If I do marry her, Ellis and I won’t have a hope, because you girls will gang up on us.”

“We won’t be able to,” I said. “The distribution will be equal.”

“They’re never equal between the sexes. You already gang up on Ellis and me all by yourself.”

“I do not!”

“You’re ganging up on me right now, at this very minute, single-handedly baiting the marriage trap. I tell you, it’s the ultimate female conspiracy. You’re all in on it. Personally, I can’t see what all the fuss is about.”

Ellis returned, followed by a waiter who set steaming crystal glasses with handles on the table in front of us. Ellis flopped into a chair.

Hank set his cigarette in an ashtray and picked up his toddy. He blew steam from the surface and took a cautious sip. “So, Ellis, our darling girl here was just saying we should go on a trip,” he said. “Find us a plesiosaur.”

“Sure she was,” said Ellis.

“She was. She has it all planned out,” said Hank. “Tell him, Maddie.”

“You’re drunk,” I said, laughing.

“That is true, I will admit,” said Hank, “but I still think we should do it.” He ground the cigarette out so hard its snuffed end splayed like a spent bullet. “We’ve been talking about it for years. Let’s do it. I’m serious.”

“No you’re not,” I said.

Hank once again clasped his heart. “What’s happened to you, Maddie? Don’t tell me you’ve lost your sense of adventure. Has Violet been civilizing you in secret?”

“No, of course not. You haven’t given her the chance. But we can’t go now. Liners haven’t run since the *Athenia* went down.”

I realized I’d made it sound like it had spontaneously sprung a leak, when in reality it had been torpedoed by a German U-boat with 1,100 civilians on board.

“Where there’s a will, there’s a way,” said Hank, nodding sagely. He sipped the toddy again, then peered into it accusingly. “Hmmm. Think I prefer whiskey after all. Back in a minute. Ellis, talk to your wife. Clearly she’s picking up bad habits.”

He launched himself from his chair, and for a moment looked like he might topple over. He clutched the back of Ellis’s chair while he regained his balance and finally wafted off, drifting like a butterfly.

Ellis and I sat in relative silence, within a bubble created by the chatter and laughter of other people.

He slid slowly down in his chair until it must have looked empty from behind. His eyes were glassy, and he’d turned a bit gray.

My own ears buzzed from the champagne. I lifted both hands to investigate my hair, and discovered the curls on one side had come undone and were clinging to my neck. Reaching further around, I realized that the diamond hair comb given to me by my mother-in-law was missing. I felt a stab of panic. It had been a gift on our wedding day, a rare moment of compassion shown me by a woman who had made no secret of not wanting me to marry her son, but was nonetheless moved to give it to me seconds before Hank walked me down the aisle.

“I think we should do it,” Ellis said.

“Sure,” I said gaily. “We’ll just hop on the next—”

“I mean it,” he said sharply.

I looked up, startled by his tone. He was grinding his jaw. I wasn’t sure exactly when it had happened, but his mood had shifted. We were no longer playing a game.

He looked at me in irritation. “What? Why shouldn’t we?”

“Because of the war,” I said gently.

“Carpe diem, and all that crap. The war is part of the adventure.

God knows I'm not getting near it any other way. Neither is Hank, for that matter." He raked a hand through his hair, leaving a swath of it standing on end. He leaned in closer and narrowed his eyes. "You do know what they call us, don't you?" he said. "'FFers.'"

He and Hank were the only 4Fers in the room. I wondered if someone had slighted him when he'd gone to find drinks.

Hank took his flat-footedness in stride, as he did most things, but being given 4F status had devastated Ellis. His color blindness had gone undetected until he tried to enlist and was rejected. He'd tried a second time at a different location and was turned down again. Although it was clearly not his fault, he was right that people judged, and I knew how this chipped at him. It was relentless and unspoken, so he couldn't even defend himself. His own father, a veteran of the Great War, had treated him with undisguised revulsion since hearing the news. This injustice was made all the more painful because we lived with my in-laws, who had perversely removed any chance at escape. Two days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, they cut Ellis's allowance by two thirds. My mother-in-law broke it to us in the drawing room before dinner, announcing with smug satisfaction that she was sure we'd be pleased to know that until "this terrible business was over" the money would be going toward war bonds. Strictly speaking, that may have been where the money was going, but it was perfectly clear that the real motive was punishing Ellis. His mother was exacting revenge because he'd dared to marry me, and his father—well, we weren't exactly sure. Either he didn't believe that Ellis was color-blind, or he couldn't forgive him for it. The nightmarish result was that we were forced to live under the constant scrutiny of people we'd come to think of as our captors.

"You know how hard it is," he went on, "with everyone staring at me, wondering why I'm not serving."

"They don't stare—"

"Don't patronize me! You know perfectly well they do!"

His outburst caused everyone to turn and look.

Ellis waved an angry hand at them. "See?"

He glanced fiercely around. To a person, they turned away, their scandalized expressions trained elsewhere. Conversations resumed, but in dampened tones.

Ellis locked eyes with me. “I know I look perfectly healthy,” he continued, his voice under taut control. “My own father thinks I’m a coward, for Christ’s sake. I need to prove myself. To him, to them, to *me*. Of all people, I thought you’d understand.”

“Darling, I do understand,” I said.

“But do you?” he asked, his mouth stretching into a bitter smile.

“Of course,” I said, and I did, although at that moment I would have said anything to calm him down. He’d been drinking hard liquor since early afternoon, and I knew things could degenerate quickly. The carefully averted faces of those around us already portended a very unpleasant beginning to the new year.

My mother-in-law, who had missed the party because of a migraine, would surely start receiving reports of our behavior by noon. I could only imagine how she’d react when she found out I’d lost the hair comb. I resolved to telephone the next day and throw myself on Mrs. Pew’s mercy. If the comb had come out in the snow, it was probably gone forever, but if it had fallen down the back of a sofa, it might turn up.

Ellis watched me closely, the fire dancing in his eyes. After a few seconds, his angry mask melted into an expression of sad relief. He leaned sideways to pat my knee and almost fell out of his chair.

“That’s my girl,” he said, struggling upright. “Always up for adventure. You’re not like the other girls, you know. There’s not an ounce of fun in them. That’s why Hank won’t marry Violet, of course. He’s holding out for another you. Only there isn’t one. I’ve got the one and only.”

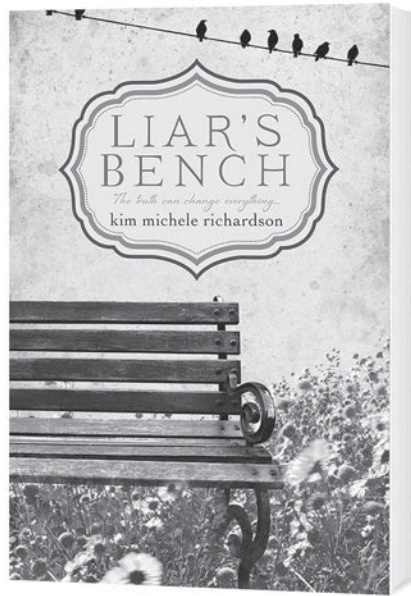
“Who the whatty-what now?” said Hank, appearing from nowhere and crashing back into his chair. “Over here!” he barked, snapping his fingers above his head. A waiter set more drinks on the table in front of us. Hank turned back to Ellis. “Is she trying to marry me off again? I swear there’s an echo in here.”

“No. She’s agreed. We’re going to Scotland.”

Hank’s eyes popped open. “Really?” He looked at me for confirmation.

I didn’t think I’d agreed, per se, at least not after I realized we weren’t just joking, but since I’d managed to defuse the bomb and perhaps even save the evening, I decided to play along.

“Sure,” I said, gesturing grandly. “Why not?”



*Perfect for readers of **The Secret Life of Bees**, and **The Help**.*



In 1972, on Mudas Summers' seventeenth birthday, her beloved Mama, Ella, is found hanging from the rafters of their home. Most people in Peckinpaw, Kentucky, assume that Ella's no-good husband did the deed. Others think Ella grew tired of his abuse and did it herself. Muddy is determined to find out for sure either way, especially once she finds strange papers hidden amongst her mama's possessions.

But Peckinpaw keeps its secrets buried deep. Adorning the town square is a seat built from the gallows of a hanged slave. A tribute, a relic—and a caution—it's known as Liar's Bench. Now, the answers Muddy seeks soon lead back to the hatred and corruption that have echoed through the town for years.

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A Cornerstone

August 1860

When a lie seeps into the very heartwood of a town, soaks the beams and posts that hold it up from the earth, the rot sets to its work. The ruin that cruelty brings is always just a matter of time. And ruin had fully taken hold in August of 1860, when Mrs. Evelyn Anderson, mistress of Hark Hill Plantation of Peckinpaw, Kentucky, reported that she had been poisoned by her house slave, Frannie Crow.

The plantation's overseer had soiled Frannie on the dirt of the kitchen floor in the big house. Bruised and bloodied, Frannie was unable to perform her house chores the next day. When Frannie failed to serve the morning meal, Mrs. Anderson called her into the dining room and demanded an explanation.

Unable to control her tears, Frannie confessed the rape and the loss of two brass buttons during the assault—buttons given as marks of gratitude for seven years of faithful service.

The mistress immediately sent for the overseer, then ordered him to bring Frannie outside. He gladly dragged Frannie out to the Osage tree, the one that shaded the side yard, bent her over a whiskey barrel, and flogged her until her dress was in shreds and the blood spidered down the length of her legs, pooling at her feet. Then Hark Hill's mistress said to all the Negroes watching, "Since Frannie meant to cheat me out of a day's labor, let it be widely known she has now done it."

Two weeks later, and in delicate condition, Mrs. Anderson summoned Frannie to her bedside complaining of stomach cramps and fretting the safety of her unborn child. Frannie went outside to the old Osage orange tree, picked two of its fruits, and went about making a warm, milky tea concoction for her mistress, a remedy her mammy had taught her.

Just hours later, Mrs. Anderson miscarried. She called to her husband, Bartholomew Anderson. Weeping, she exclaimed, “Frannie poisoned me.” Mr. Anderson reported the poisoning to the town marshal, saying, “Our house slave did it. Frannie Crow.”

Four days later, a trial was conducted at the courthouse. At the end of Frannie’s fifteen-minute trial, the jury of white men found her guilty of poisoning. And, as an addendum, thievery was added to her charges: two brass buttons: value—two cents.

Over the course of the next five days, the good townsfolk of Peckinpaw built a gallows in front of their courthouse. On the sixth day, Town Square filled up with people from as far away as Bowling Green, Lexington, and even Louisville. Many spread quilts on the courthouse grounds, eating picnic lunches and catching up on news and gossip as the children played games of marbles, Graces, and hide-and-seek around the gallows.

At noon, black slave Frannie Crow, Poisoner and Thief, was led up to the gallows, where she was afforded a brief allowance of words.

“Let it be widely known,” Frannie said, “since Mistress Anderson meant to cheat me out of my honesty, she has now done it.”

The hangman placed a seed sack over Frannie’s head and cinched it with rope.

Below, Mrs. Anderson, dressed in a silk taffeta day dress with a matching spoon bonnet and fine kidskin gloves, steadied herself against the gallows post. She watched in silence as the trap door opened and Frannie’s body dropped through. The rope jerked tight, snapping her neck. A stain spread quickly across the crotch of her burlap dress. Frannie’s body released a final death tremor and then went limp. A faint stench wafted across the crowd.

A parasol's long fringe tassels hid the mistress's expression, just as her string of lies hid the truth.

Frannie's body swayed back and forth. A thin, white, holey sock slipped slowly down and off her foot. The wind kicked up, blowing it away from the gallows just like a page ripped out of history.

Frannie's kin was ordered to dismantle the gallows and store it on Hark Hill Plantation, out in one of the wood sheds near the slaves' quarters. In 1862, Amos Crow, yellow slave and son of Frannie, was given the pieces of his mama's gallows and two healthy hogs, along with his Freedom Papers.

Mr. Anderson instructed Amos to use most of the wood, bolts, and square nails to build a pen for Amos's hogs, but to save the finer pieces of oak and hardware to fashion a bench for Town Square—a gift to the town to commemorate the benevolence of one of their most honorable sons.

The name, "Anderson's Bench," faded with his memory to "Square's Bench." But its legacy of misfortune drawn from lies, false promises, and tall tales earned the name it kept for good—Liar's Bench.

Somewhere, whether in Heaven or Hell or in between, the ghost of Frannie Crow smiled.

The Scars of Others

August 11, 1972

It could've easily been left unnamed, but like most small towns carved out from the back roads of Anywhere, USA, Peckinpaw, Kentucky, had its staple—its Liar's Bench. Used for both the telling of tales and for courting, the bench sat on the curb, nestled between two geranium-filled copper pots positioned in front of a Dolly Parton and Porter Wagoner dream-themed leather goods store: the Parton & Porter. Next door, the scents of peach cobbler and chicken fried steak wafted out from the Top Hat Café and onto the bench. And in western Kentucky, a good cornerstone was the strength of any town, tale, or courtship just as sure as the bench's weathered planks of oak and wrought-iron arms and legs cradling it were the support for its tale spinners and sinners.

Now, you didn't necessarily have to be a liar or a courter to sit on Liar's Bench, just maybe the *better* liar or courter at the time. My daddy, Adam Persis Summers, was a good one. Liar, that is, when he sat on this bench and swore to my mama that he hadn't betrayed her.

But Mama's next husband, Tommy Dale Whitlock, had proved to be the better courter and liar three times over.

On this very bench, he'd promised my mama, Ella Mudas Tilley, that he would always love her—but he cheated. He swore

to protect her—but he beat her. He vowed to honor her—but he buried her under six feet of rich Kentucky soil.

Mama only lied once. She promised Tommy she'd never leave him—but she did.

Today, on my seventeenth birthday.

The legacy of the old bench—what it had heard, what it had borne witness to—sat like a deep scar covering broken bones, bones that hadn't healed right and never would. I'd known as much from the first time my grammy Essie warned me of its taint, to the day I'd sat on it and accepted a friendship ring from my ex-boyfriend, Tripp Seacat, not so long ago. But the very worst was way back when: the day I'd spied Tommy Whitlock holding my mama's hand here on this bench, snugged up tight as a tick, and telling tall tales.

There'd been plenty of talk about Liar's Bench being cursed—whispers of how it had soaked in the wrong of Frannie Crow's death. Of how those lies would splinter into anyone who sat upon its weather-beaten wood. And on more than one occasion over the years, a God-fearing citizen of Peckinpaw would even go so far as to take up a petition to burn it. But the elders wouldn't hear of it. When I'd asked Grammy Essie, who was also the town librarian, *why not*, she'd quoted St. Jerome, saying, "Muddy, the scars of others should teach us caution."

And so the elders would quiet the naysayers, insisting that the bench served up a dish of "cautious reminder" to others.

But everyone knows that liars and their willing sponges don't heed warnings. That's why I have been, on occasion, firmly in the camp that would like to see it burn.

Today, this bench seemed like the only place that could soak up my grief. I sat down on Liar's Bench, lit a match to my gasoline-soaked thoughts, and wept red-hot tears.

Moments later, Daddy walked up behind me, put his hands on my shoulders, and squeezed. "Thanks for waiting," he said, circling around the bench to take a seat. Closing up his law office always took a while since he had lots of important legal papers that had to be locked up. I ran my thumb across each finger

of my right hand, picking up speed. Continuously gliding, ticking off my rattled thoughts.

“Muddy, everything’s going to be okay.” Daddy noted my long-time habit, and lifted my hand and squeezed.

He grew quiet for a spell.

“Sheriff wants me to meet with him as soon as possible.”

I turned and looked up at him. He paused, drawing his lips back to his teeth. “I’m so sorry, lil birdie, real sorry. I don’t know what to say. It isn’t right losing your mama like this . . . and on your birthday, too.” His eyes filled up same as mine. “She was a good mother, a good woman. . . . There’s not a day that goes by that I haven’t wished it had turned out differently between us. I’m sorry, Muddy. I’m so sorry.” A breeze stirred as the silence lengthened around us.

Normally, I’d light into him for calling me Muddy. Instead, I shuttered my grief-soaked eyes, leaned into his shoulder, and inhaled the comforting blends of his woodsy aftershave. For this moment, I let his mistakes with Mama slip away. My thoughts became mercifully numb, suspended somewhere between calm and pandemonium.

“Before I forget, baby, Pastor Dugin called and asked to drop by this evening. I told him that would be fine.” I nodded my consent. “Muddy, there’s something else. . . .”

I met his eyes and saw the flatness that meant bad news was coming; like the time he’d told me my dog Charlie had been hit by a pickup. Then, again when Grammy Essie crossed over, and soon after, when Papaw had followed. Now, my mama was dead, too. What more could there possibly be?

“Nothing’s official yet, but they’re strongly leaning toward ruling this a suicide.”

I stiffened. “Suicide? No. No way! Everything was just fine when I visited her Thursday. . . .” I ran my hand over my face to swab off the sorrow left trailing down my cheeks. “I don’t believe for one minute Mama took her life!”

Daddy shook his head and studied his secretary as she crossed the street toward his courthouse office. “Me neither,

baby.” Weary, he pulled himself up. “I’m so glad you got to see her yesterday. . . . Right now I’m fixin’ to head on over to Ella’s to talk with the sheriff and the coroner. I’ll take you on home first.”

I stood to face him. “No, I have to see her. I’m going with you.” I planted my feet firmly in front of his.

He cleared his throat, ready to lend argument and put his foot down with me.

I crossed my arms. “I’m old enough to go with you. I’m seventeen now—an adult.”

Daddy cocked his head and shoved his hands deep inside his pockets. “You sure ’bout this?”

My throat locked up, forcing out a croaked, “Yes.” With a shaky hand, I grabbed the back of Liar’s Bench, leaving one more lie to soak in and feed.

2

The Better Liar

By the time we reached Mama's, I was having second thoughts. Despite it being one of the hottest days of the year in Kentucky, a cold shiver slid over my body. I peered upward to distance myself from the crime scene before me and watched the choreographed movements of a flock of birds veer, then turn in an unpredictable fashion, erratically stippling the summer skies. Their puzzling flight was punctuated by the intermittent cries coming from inside my mama's house, those of my seven-month-old baby half sister, Genevieve.

Daddy flexed his jaw and I saw his soft gray eyes darken to cavern-cold. "Daddy . . . Mama wouldn't kill herself. And that one trooper said she did it in front of baby Genevieve. . . ."

"Shush, baby." He squinted his eyes to keep out the broiling sun, intent on the exchange of conversation nearby.

We watched Sheriff Allen, aptly nicknamed "Jingles." It was a well-known Peckinpaw fact that you could hear him coming long before you saw the glint of his spit-polished gold badge.

Jingles unsnapped his official oversized jail key ring from his utility belt and pulled off another ring that held his rabbit's foot, a metal horse-head bottle opener from the Dixie Brewing company and his lucky Indian head penny, then ducked into his car to place a set of keys in the ignition. He grabbed his clipboard and jingled his way back and forth across my mama's front yard, pausing to talk to the different officials scattered around.

He stopped a few feet from us and tapped his clipboard's pages with a pen.

The sheriff sneaked a peek at me, then shuffled a little farther away so that he was partially hidden behind a police cruiser. But not far enough away that I couldn't hear.

I listened in horror as Jingles explained to the state trooper standing beside him. "I'm not gonna call it yet, Herb. . . . And nobody's gonna put much stock in the neighbor's statement, him being touched and all. . . . Hell, it does look suspicious, what with how many times Ella showed up for her shift wearing sunglasses to hide Whitlock's marks."

"And with him stoned out of his mind on LSD and God-knows-what-else, he could've done this," the state trooper chimed in. "And then there's her suitcase—out and half-filled. Looks to me like she had enough of living with him, not just in simply living."

Suitcase? I tried to remember if I'd seen one when I was visiting her yesterday.

Jingles shook his head. As his voice softened, his words slowed and slid easily away. "Some days that gal would jus' sit at that desk of hers an' refuse to take off those sunglasses, all the whiles, she's busy fussin' about them florescent lights hurting her eyes an' making her head pound. . . ." He clucked his tongue and sighed. "Lil Ella couldn't have weighed more than ninety pounds soaked, him, damn near two hundred. Damn pillhead!" Jingles turned and spat. He handed the clipboard to the trooper.

"Your desk clerk talked to Whitlock at about ten this morning?" The trooper looked over the notes.

"Yeah, 'bout an hour ago. Hettie had called to see why Ella'd missed her shift," Jingles said, and pointed to the house. "If ya need to talk to her, she's in there taking care of the baby until Child Welfare gets here."

I looked at Mama's home—the bare windows curtained with nothing more than bird droppings splattered down the panes. It was hard to believe that a banker's daughter and a once-prominent

member of the Peckinpaw community lived in this rundown old clapboard, held together by peeling paint and thick moss layered over shadowed boards. That she'd been living her life just pennies shy from collecting a government draw check.

I silently prayed that she'd walk out arms wide, ready to cradle me and make this nightmare go away. I'd sent up the same prayer the day she went off to the big city with Tommy and left me here in Peckinpaw with Daddy. That bright summer day right before my ninth birthday, when I'd felt my childhood halved like an onion, leaving me trapped between the tear-stained slices of Before and After. That split, that cold gloom cast across my heart, always dogged me, forever measured into my past and present.

My legs wobbled, a darkness threatened. Then rage filled my core, swelled and bruised, bringing back function. I was shocked by my sudden anger toward Mama and her death, and at everyone I felt was responsible.

Daddy must have sensed it, too. He grasped my elbow and urged me to sit down on the grass. Intent on unlatching my hurt and finding a target, I jerked away. "You! It's your fault! You drove her away with all your lying, your cheatin'. You. You and this Podunk town!" I waved my arm. "The founding fathers got it right when they named it Peckinpaw. No wonder Mama couldn't stand living here. Nothing more than a place where chickens peck and horses paw!"

Wounded, Daddy took a step back. "Muddy, you're . . . you're having a nervous spell. You go wait in the car and I'll be along after—"

Before I could collect myself, clanging bells and cheerful music toppled his words and my regret. We both turned and watched a Mister Softee ice-cream truck—painted with candy-colored cartoons and treats—grind its gears and come to a halt alongside the police cruisers.

For a moment, a glint of my long-ago summers, chocolate-kissed smiles and cotton-candy scents, crowded out the dark. I'd loved Mister Softee's jaunty carnival song even more than his confections: It had lassoed the nights, matching my delighted

squeals and proving a balm for the bruises of childhood, both the kind you could see and the sort you could only feel deep underneath your skin.

The Mister Softee driver, Joey Sims, a boy from my biology class, slid back the large square window of the truck. His dark eyes popped out like buckeyes in buttermilk as he craned his head out to study the scene.

Baby Genevieve's screams drifted outside again, jolting me back to the present. Sims turned his head, and his neck stretched toward the house like a snapping turtle targeting a minnow. I took a step back, trying to hide behind Daddy before Sims's eyes could grab hold of me.

Jingles hollered across the road, "Move along, Sims." He waved his arms in the air. "This here is a police investigation. That truck ain't due to sell treats 'til after supper, son."

Sims ducked back in, slammed the window shut, and took off. I knew that in less than an hour, he'd have told everyone about *the something horrible going on* out at the Whitlock place. By nightfall, the town would be buzzing with gossip and speculation. I worried about my boyfriend, Bobby Marshall. Well, not exactly my boyfriend . . . but getting close. Still, I wished I could reach him before Joey found him first.

I drew in a weary breath. It didn't matter, nothing mattered except Mama.

Jingles leaned over to Herb and flipped through the pages of his preliminary report. The trooper pointed. "See this? The coroner said if that damn living room rafter would've been dry-walled over instead of partially exposed, this wouldn't have happened. But, then again, she went out to Whitlock's truck and got his rope to throw over the beam. So if she was that determined, who knows? Her keys *were* found in the cab of the truck. . . ."

Rope . . . the rafter? I turned to her truck. Oh, dear God, had Mama gone and done that. . . . A protest lay strangled in my throat. *No*. It couldn't be.

Mr. Harper from Harper's Filling Station pulled up behind it. He backed his wrecker up to the rear of Mama's truck, then

climbed out and unwound the metal cable from the wench, drowning out everyone's conversation. After he had Mama's vehicle hooked up to his, Mr. Harper smoothed back his oily brown hair and grabbed my mama's pocketbook from inside her truck. I'd bought it for her this past Mother's Day. Now, old man Harper was soiling it with his dirty paws, speckling the white leather with dollops of black oil grease and tobacco juice. I lurched forward to snatch it from his fat hand, but Daddy latched on to my arm and cut me a warning look. Mr. Harper startled and pinched his catfish mouth shut.

He strolled past, clutching the purse to his smelly union suit. Jingles took the purse and thanked him for retrieving it; then he asked Mr. Harper to tow the truck on down to the jail lot. "We'll have it searched later for possible evidence," Jingles told the state trooper.

My half sister screamed yet again, chilling the air, wounding like a knife. I pulled to the cry, but Daddy sidestepped me. "No, Muddy. That's a crime scene they're working. The baby will be fine."

My insides knotted.

Jingles adjusted the brim of his uniform hat. "Poor lil baby Genevieve." He sighed heavily. "That sorry piece of pig shit Whitlock always whopping up on Ella. The missus and I tried to talk her into going to Louisville or Nashville to get some counseling help. . . . Damn, I'd hoped when I gave her that dispatching job down at the station, it would help some." He turned to the side, spat out a wad of tobacco.

"Hell's bells. It's all a coin toss," Jingles went on. "I still think Whitlock's too much of a coward for the likes of that in there. A crazy dopehead, a drunkard, and always good for a petty slap or sucker punch, but I have my doubts about him bein' a murderer."

I took a step closer to Jingles.

Jingles dug into his back pocket, pulled out his Boker knife, then reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out his Warren County Twist. He slowly cut himself a generous fresh plug and stuffed his jaw. Wagging the knife at the state trooper, he said,

“Doc Lawrence examined her body and it shows Ella’s bruises are fresh. All I can do is wait ’til the bastard sobers up, question him, and hope I can make some sense out of it all before he lawyers up. Meantime, I’m bookin’ him for abuse of a corpse and illegal possession of drugs. Most I can do right now.” He tucked the Boker back into his pocket and pulled a handkerchief from another, wiped his mouth, then brought it up to his nose and gave a loud honk.

Jingles looked our way and took a few steps toward us, stopping to curl his fingers under the large flab of flesh overhanging his utility belt. With a quick tug upward, Jingles readjusted the waist of his britches and hooked his thumbs into his waistband. “Adam, mind if I have a few words with you?” he asked, stealing a glance at me. He hesitated, then added, “Without Muddy, if that’d be okay.”

“Sheriff Jingles, I’m seventeen now. And”—I stuck my chin out and tried to make my quivering voice strong—“I . . . I’m not stupid. That’s my mama and I ain’t budging until someone tells me what’s going on.”

“Not disputin’ that, Muddy. Everyone knows you’ve got the smarts, but there’s some things best not said in the company of females.” Jingles dropped his gaze to the ground and rocked on his heels, waiting.

“Never mind that. Muddy can handle herself,” Daddy said. “You’re booking him on murder, right?” I nodded, grateful for his support.

Doc Lawrence, Smitt County’s coroner, walked up and handed the sheriff a paper. “Jingles, right now I’m calling the time of death at nine a.m., Friday, eleventh day of August 1972. I need to confirm Ella’s age?” He gave me a sidelong glance before turning to Daddy.

Daddy looked down at his shoes. “She should’ve got out sooner,” he mumbled. “She was so close. . . .”

“So close to what, Daddy?”

Doc Lawrence softly cleared his throat. “Adam?”

“Thirty-seven,” Daddy snapped. “She was thirty-seven and too damn young to be robbed of the rest of her life from that

ne'er-do-well hayseed!" He jerked his thumb toward the sheriff's car, then shoved his hands into his trousers and kicked the dirt, a film of brown air settling on his finely pressed khakis.

I looked away as a silence descended on us, thick as dust and just as cloudy. Finally, Doc Lawrence asked, "Jingles, anything else from the neighbor . . . Higgy Flynn?"

"Check with him before you leave. Higgy doesn't have a phone." Jingles nodded a dismissal to Doc and turned back to Daddy. "Adam, you know we can't do anything till we've processed the scene, collected all the evidence, and—"

"I don't give a dried apple damn, Jingles." There was a razored edge to Daddy's voice that I'd never heard before. "As the Prosecuting Attorney of Smitt County, I say that bastard's guilty of murder. And I want the highest bail set."

"You're putting the cart before the horse," Jingles huffed. "Case hasn't even been ruled a homicide."

Daddy balled a fist. "You best charge him with murder before you end up doubling your paperwork."

Instinctively, I put a protective hand on Daddy's arm.

"Now, Adam"—Jingles raised his palm—"settle down. You're gonna have to argue this one to an empty room. You know good an' damn well we'll have to call the Attorney General's office and have them send over a relief prosecutor if it's ruled murder. Being she's your ex and the mother of your child, ain't no judge gonna allow you to set the trial." Jingles shot me a glance and moved in front of me, blocking. "Sorry, son." He put his hand on Daddy's shoulder. "Ya know I want to help you out here, but from what I've pieced together from the neighbor's statement, Hettie's, and everybody and everything else, it's pointing to sui—"

Wails of indignation erupted from baby Genevieve as the state trooper struggled to open the ratty screen door while trying to straitjacket the baby's flailing arms with his own. The trooper whispered to the infant as he left the house and hot-footed it across the lawn.

"Genevieve," I said, running to her. "Please," I begged the official. "Please let me hold my baby sister." The exasperated trooper handed

her to me. Genevieve buried her face in the crook of my shoulder, muffling her cries. I turned away from him and bounced her gently in my arms, cooing softly until her sobs faded into a string of hiccups.

After a few minutes, the trooper said, “Ma’am, we need to take her now.” He opened his arms.

“Please,” I backed up, “I’m all she has.”

Daddy gripped my shoulder. “It’s okay, Muddy. The law needs to move her to safety. She’ll be fine.”

“I don’t understand. Why can’t we take her?”

Genevieve cried out as the trooper lifted her from my arms.

“Them’s the rules, baby,” Daddy said. “Don’t worry, they’ll take good care of her.”

When I kissed Genevieve good-bye, she twisted and tried to wriggle out of the trooper’s grip. Her tear-soaked face reddened as she stretched out her arms to me.

The trooper handed the squalling baby off to another official who was waiting to place her inside the cruiser.

I turned away to bury my own face on Daddy’s shoulder.

Tommy, securely handcuffed with his hands behind his back in the rear of Jingles’s car, began to yell and bang his head against the side door window. “Let me out, I didn’t do anything. . . . I done tol’ ya, Jingles, I was ‘relaxin’ in the bedroom. Why’d ya go an’ bust my jaw like that, huh?” Tommy rubbed his chin against his shoulder, nursing. “Hey, let me out, Jingles. . . . How many times did I tell ya already, Ella climbed up on that chair and done her own deed! Just as sure as Frannie Crow had sealed her own gallows fate, way back when! An’ you can bet Summers is behind all this,” he snarled, butting his head toward Daddy. “Summers . . . you jackleg liar. Nothin’ but goddamn lies. You an’ Ella! I saw y’all squeezed together on Liar’s Bench! Liars! Nothin’ but lies, Summers . . . Hey! Wait a goddamn minute! Where are you bastards takin’ my baby?”

Tommy turned sideways, leaned back on the car seat, and gave two powerful kicks, shattering the car door’s window. “That’s my baby!”

“Sumbitch!” Jingles fumbled for his mace, dropped his clip-

board, and darted to the car. Trooper Herb followed, with Daddy trailing right behind them. “Stay back, Adam.” Jingles pointed him a warning finger as they approached the cruiser.

Opening the car’s opposite door, Herb aimed his own canister of mace and shot three bursts straight into Tommy’s face.

“Ahh, my eyes, my eyes! Bastard! Ya blinded me—I can’t see!” he raged between violent coughs.

Jingles leaned across his steering wheel and grabbed the keys out of the ignition. Moving quickly, he yanked open the damaged door, then yelled at Herb, “He’s drooling. Don’t want the sumbitch to die of asphyxiation.” He tossed his keys to Herb. “Grab my jumper cables from the trunk. Aw, damn you, Whitlock! You’ve busted up my cruiser. Ah, shit, shit! Sit up! You’re slobbering all over my automobile!”

The trooper dashed to the trunk and pulled out the battery jumper cables, then sped back to Jingles.

“Move him upright, Herb, and fasten his lap belt while I secure these cables!” Jingles wrapped Tommy’s feet and ankles with the cables, then pulled the ends tight underneath the door and slammed it shut.

Everything seemed to weigh me down inside, sift into corner edges. *What the hell is going on here? Why is Tommy blaming Daddy? And why doesn’t Jingles just let that son of a bitch die!*

I felt myself torn between kinging myself a Kentucky hill to hurl my anger from, to digging a cave where I could retreat and bury my imploding heart.

My stomach landed at my feet. Nausea got the best of me and I turned quickly away from the chaos to quietly escape behind a tree. After a moment, I moved away from my mess and spotted Jingles’s clipboard not two feet away. Shaky, I picked up the preliminary report and skimmed the pages. Tommy, Daddy, and the officials’ shouts and curses faded and bowed to respite as I soaked up the words.

As I read the testaments to Mama’s death—how the neighbor went from window to window, how Hettie kept on calling and calling, and the unspeakable thing Tommy had done with the ribbons—anger shattered what grief had not yet claimed of

my senses, leaving them strewn like pickup sticks around my thoughts.

A knob rattled, pulling me out. I watched as the door to Mama's house creaked open and the coroner's assistants slowly made their way outside with a heavy stretcher. My mama. *Mama . . . Genevieve . . . Poor baby Genevieve . . .* Jingles's report . . . The ribbons, and what he'd done after . . . *Murder isn't enough?* Two of the coroner's assistants adjusted the top of the white tarp, tucking it securely around Mama's body, but not before I saw her exposed ankles.

I dropped the report. "Mommy, my mommy . . ." My heart cartwheeled up into my throat, stealing my breath. I took off at full speed toward the stretcher. My mouth dropped, twisted, and my every inch of life slid rabbit hole down.

I don't know how long I stood there screaming at the metal gurney, my hands clamped tight to my ears, trying to drown out my own frightening voice and the visions in my head.

Daddy rushed over to me. I reached for one of the pink ribbons fastened around her swollen ankle. *Ribbons. How? She never has ribbons in the house.* I jabbed a finger toward Tommy. "He always made her use ugly rubber bands, cheap bastard."

"Muddy, c'mon, let me take you home," Daddy said in a commanding whisper. I gripped the ribbon harder. "You need to get some rest, let the police do their job now. Let's go, baby. C'mon."

One of Doc Lawrence's helpers clamped his hand over my wrist and twisted, forcing me to release the ribbon. It felt like he was taking another piece of Mama along with it. I shot out my hand, reaching for everything I'd lost. An official took hold of my arm and whipped it behind my back.

"Let go of me. I said, *let go!*" I lifted my heel and back-kicked hard, breaking the man's grip, then took off toward Jingles's cruiser.

I pulled on the door latch.

Jammed.

Tommy's dilated eyes popped, his sweaty face reddening even more. Fresh spittle coated the glaze of dried beer on his whiskers.

He rocked himself away from the door. “You . . .” I banged my fist on the roof. “You took away *everything*.”

A state trooper locked his arms around my waist, lifting me away from the car.

I wriggled out of his grip and dropped to my knees. Grabbing fistfuls of bluegrass, I rocked in the dirt, and howled, “MURDERER, MURDERER.”

Daddy knelt down behind me and wrapped my sorrow in his embrace.

Weak, I lowered my head to the ground, letting my heart-break choke the earth.

3

A Lie Riding on Another's Truth

Before he drove us away from Mama's house, Daddy pulled out his handkerchief and gave it to me. I clutched it and sat stone-faced. From the car window, I watched the mailman gawk before stuffing Friday's mail into Mama's old cast-iron mailbox hanging off the siding under her porch. I turned away as Peckinpaw's undertaker pulled slowly out of the driveway.

The ride back to our farmhouse was silent. When we reached home, I hurried out, leaving Daddy sitting in my Ford Mustang—the birthday gift he'd surprised me with on the day that would now mark my final visit with Mama.

I stood on the porch stoop, the memory of our last time together replaying, flickering back and forth and over and over, like a grainy scene on a reel of film, projected onto a worn screen. It had been a perfect, sunny Thursday. Hard to believe it was only yesterday.

"Silver blue," Daddy announced, holding up a car key. "And it complements your gray eyes, too, Muddy. It's fast. And 'bout as powerful as those runner legs of yours, grown two city blocks long this year." He raised a finger. "You be careful now, ya hear?"

I kicked up my long, awkward legs, squealed, and ran my hands over the Pony's hood and compared the shine of my 1965 to his 1970 Mustang Boss, his "Goober-Grabber-Green" as he

called it, and the one I'd been testing my driving skills in for over a year.

"I can't believe it! It's perfect! Can I drive it now?"

"You act like it's your birthday or something," he teased.

"Tomorrow . . . just hours away!" I laughed. On cue, I did a little pushing and pleading and some fine pouting until, laughingly, he agreed to let me drive. "It's sharp, Daddy."

"You'll see," he pointed out, "it's a clutch, like mine. Not one of those automatics. That way you'll never be stuck. And you're more likely to keep your hands on the wheel, instead of that tube of lipstick."

"I love it! Thank you, thank you!" I pecked him on the cheek. "I need to go get some stuff for it. For her," I corrected. "I'm going to call her Peggy! 'Peggy Sue . . . I love you . . .'" I sang Buddy Holly's song.

"One of your grammy's favorite songs." He smiled.

"I still have the record she gave me." I bent over the hood, arms wide in a sweeping hug. I'd waited so long for this—worked so hard. Counting last night's shift at Ruby's Dog 'n' Suds and the six hours of babysitting before that, and Nettie's Nest four hours from the week before, I'd tallied up 1,224 hours and 45 minutes of "hard" during these past three years. At last! "Wait here, it'll only take a minute to get my things."

Daddy chuckled. "Not going anywhere. And you deserve it, gal. I told you three years ago that if you worked after school and did summer jobs and saved, I'd match your earnings. He nodded at me, pride shining in his eyes.

I met him a few minutes later in the driveway with a large hatbox.

Daddy dangled the key in front of me. "You sure you can't wait 'til Friday . . . ? Oh, never mind, on second thought, you'll have me worn down to a frazzle, with not a minute's peace." He tossed me the keys.

Laughing, I jumped into the car. I inhaled the scent of vinyl and traced circles on the eye shadow blue and white bucket seats. After I emptied the contents of the box onto the passenger side, I tossed my compact, tissues, and a lipstick tube into the

glove compartment. Then I carefully arranged some of my favorite 8-track tapes of music—Johnny Cash’s *Man in Black*, Neil Young’s *Harvest*, and The Who’s *Who’s Next*—inside the cartridge box on the passenger floorboard. I fastened the seatbelt across my lap. Satisfied, I flung the box to the backseat.

My feet found the pedals and I pumped the brake, the clutch, and gas. I ran my thumb over the silver pony emblem in the center of the steering wheel. Taking a whiff of the interior, I noticed a faint smell of cigarette smoke. Not my style, but it fit the muscle car.

“Lasso that pony, gal,” Daddy called out.

“Okay!” I fumbled for the ignition. The key slid in. Taking a deep breath, I gripped the skinny wheel, pressed my foot heavy on the clutch, pushed the stick in neutral, and cranked. The engine caught on the first turn and purred.

“Can we pick up ThommaLyn?” I asked.

“Not until you’ve gotten the feel of the car. Plenty of time for driving your friends later.” Daddy chomped on his unlit cigar, studying. “Let’s see that shoulder-check.”

“Got it!” I stretched my neck over my right shoulder, then back over my left, and then over to my right again. “Satisfied?”

He wiggled the cigar clenched between his teeth.

I adjusted the rearview mirror. Peering into it, I inspected my light pink lipstick, ran my fingers through my hair, and tousled, hoping I would pass every senior at Peckinpaw High. Every senior boy, that is.

“Oh”—Daddy raised a finger—“’fore I forget, the radio has a short. It comes and goes, and it’s missing the on/off button. Mike said to bring it by next week and he’d have the mechanic fix it. Okay, hands at ten and two.”

I nodded and placed my hands over the wheel in clock position.

He slid his lanky body into his own car. Leaning his head out the window, he called out, “Wear that lap belt.”

“Buckled!”

I pushed the stick into first gear and eased up on the clutch while I pushed down on the gas pedal, all in one magnificent se-

quence of commands and response. Relieved, I released a burst of air and pulled out carefully ahead of him.

The radio blared out a few lines of ZZ Top's bluesy "(Somebody Else Been) Shakin' Your Tree," giving my fingers an itch to snap along, then just as quickly, and for my own good, it went dead when I hit a mud hole.

I drove a few miles down country roads with a knuckle-white grip, nervous and thrilled, watching out for crossing critters and other cars, keeping Peggy straight and steady, and away from the shoulder. Doing it all with Daddy following close behind in his car.

When I made it safely back to our house, Daddy gave a thumbs-up.

I ran upstairs to use the old rotary dial phone. After waiting for what seemed like forever for the party line to be free, I called Mama.

"Mama, is Tommy around? I finally got my car! Yes, yessum . . . He gave it to me today! I just drove it!" I laughed. "Yes, ma'am, today, Thursday! Yes, I do know tomorrow's my birthday! Guess what I named her? I named her Peggy. She's so pretty, Mama. When can I come over and take you and Genevieve for a ride?"

She whispered into the phone receiver, "Tommy will be down for his afternoon 'nap' soon. Come in about two hours, sugar. We'll celebrate."

I smiled, knowing that Tommy's afternoon naps were a sure guarantee for us to have a peaceful visit. I looked forward to them.

Tommy hadn't made his intense dislike of me a secret when he married Mama eight years before. I saw it in his eyes when I first spied them cozying up on Liar's Bench after Mama divorced Daddy. The feeling was mutual. At first she took me to Nashville and a short spell later, Tommy was there, too. He'd grown up with a mix of relatives, straddling the borders of two home states.

I knew right off that I was in for a fight; I just didn't know what type. Within a month, Tommy had wormed his way into

her heart with his startling good looks, the promise of a better-paying job, and a sophisticated city apartment, leaving no room for me. The very next month, they'd married, and the month after that, she'd dumped me back at Daddy's.

I'd sung Tommy's good riddance when Mama dropped me back home from Nashville. But I was baptized with a new hurt when she'd left Daddy and me to go back to Tommy.

I thought for sure she'd stay with us and leave Tommy's broken promises and half-baked brain behind. Especially after the eviction man came knocking at our Nashville apartment, and then when we'd walked in and found the empty place along the wall where the three-seater Chesterfield had been. I'd heard her and Tommy's arguments with the repo man, and talk of late bills. Tommy had hit bottom, she'd said, and she didn't like his new set of pals.

I recall how I could hardly sit still on the drive from Nashville to Peckinpaw. Mama'd kept a nervous smile glued to her lips all the way there. I'd rolled down the window and stuck my head out, lapping at the breezes, hungry for home. More than once, Mama gently pulled me back inside the car. We hit the final stretch of road with my bones bursting sweet hallelujahs. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt safe, and no Tommy around to snatch me up by my hair. When we pulled into Peckinpaw, I was so excited to be home, I barely heard her when she said, "A lot of kids live with their daddies." For a second I tried to think of someone who did, but I didn't know of anyone. She opened the car door, and said, "I won't be able to stay, but you'll be safe with Adam."

"But—"

"I'll be back before you know it. No time at all, Mudas. Lickety-split."

I felt the color leave my face, and I had a fear creep hold and worry my insides. "Today?" I needled, trying to measure lickety-split. "Are you coming back today, Mama?" I reached out for her. She didn't answer, just rushed me out of the car and busied herself with the wrinkles in her dress.

Back in Peckinpaw, I attached myself to Grammy Essie, who

settled me carefully into her bosom, keeping me busy with homestead chores, school, and having me sign up for the track team.

Still, I sorely missed having a mama even before Tommy'd barged in and especially after. Folks looked at me peculiar, too, like I'd lost an arm or something. I guess I had. I still moped around for her. I wanted to Band-Aid our little family, and I knew if I could apply the right amount of ointment, I'd have them all back.

So when Mama moved back to Peckinpaw last year, I'd been hopeful, and excited about having a baby sister. I pushed aside my feelings about Tommy and met Mama on the front porch of her house, anxious and bursting for her to show me where my new room would be. I handed her a jarful of wildflowers that I'd carefully picked. But instead of welcoming me, she'd guided me off the porch and out to the crepe myrtle, making sure we were out of earshot from Tommy. "Sugar," she'd said, "there's not enough room for you and the new baby."

"I can sleep on the couch," I'd said. "Or, I could even make a pallet beside the baby's crib. And I can help with chores, and I'll babysit anytime you want."

She'd peeked over her shoulder at Tommy. "Not enough room. You have to understand, sugar."

I didn't.

Tommy's smug face showed he did. Mama had smoothed down her dress and linked her nervous hands behind her back. "You can come visit, Mudas. It'll be just like living together. You'll see."

I wouldn't.

I'd had a fine sense of abandonment. Of loss. All over again. It wasn't fair. To have her back only to have her sealed off from me so quickly. Here she was so close. I'd stood there staring hard at Tommy, who sat on the porch all cocky—leg perched on the railing, arms crossed. His glare felt like sleet stinging my face. Big droplets weighed down my lashes, forcing me to run away before he could have the satisfaction of seeing.

But I couldn't stay away long. What with Grammy Essie's

passing and Daddy's job busier than ever, I'd gravitated back to Mama.

For so long, Grammy Essie had given me her uninterrupted presence that at first I tormented myself when Mama returned home, afraid to go visit her—refusing to doormat my heart for another interruption. Daddy tried to push me to see Mama, too, offering to give me rides. I ticked off exactly six calendar days waiting for her to pack up and split again. When I saw she might be around for a bit, I found myself slowly gathering up female questions about hair and makeup lessons, boys, first dates, and fading friends. And I couldn't help but seek the answers in maternal arms.

It wasn't no time until we took solace in the mostly sneaked visits with each other. They were our little secrets: the one thing that Tommy hadn't stolen from me.

Yesterday, I'd sat on my porch stoop waiting for Tommy to go down for his nap so I could visit with Mama. Cursing Tommy with each and every tick of the clock, I felt the two hours inch by. Finally, Daddy opened the screen door and shooed me on my way, saying I was wearing out the porch boards.

And Many More . . .

I rested my head against the porch beam with a pound of regrets slowly monkey-wrenching my brain—wishing I hadn't left Mama at Tommy's doorstep yesterday and wishing I'd let Daddy drop me off at the homestead this afternoon instead of insisting on going to the crime scene with him.

Daddy was still in the car, his head stuck to the steering wheel with his arms cradling his head. I watched from the porch, worrying for him, wanting him to be strong. I felt panic claw at my throat. "Hey," I finally managed to blurt out, "it's hot out here. Coming?"

"Give me a minute," he croaked.

I studied him sitting there in my birthday present, hugging the Mustang's steering wheel, and was reminded of another birthday, my sixth. I'd fallen asleep on the porch swing, watching and waiting for him to come home from work to celebrate. Mama's face had soured a bit more with each tick of the clock. My small birthday cake sat unsliced, the lard icing cementing around the six unlit purple candles. When Daddy came dragging in after midnight, his fine clothes rumpled like morning pajamas, she'd screamed at him about his "floozy." The same floozy I'd tattled to her about a year before: the judge's pretty daughter, the one I'd caught kissing Daddy on the lips when I'd charged into his office after school to show off my latest drawing. Daddy'd shooed me out, but the very next day I'd told Mama that "the pretty lady loved Daddy, too." I'll never forget

the look in her eyes: a strange blend of grief, anger, and then the vindication that came after she'd poured herself a refreshment.

Maybe if I'd kept my big five-year-old mouth shut about what I'd seen, they would still be together. Maybe Mama would still be alive.

Again, I hollered from the porch, "C'mon, Daddy." I saw a flash of something metal in his hands and I squinted and craned my neck, suddenly nervous that he was sneaking a drink in the car. It had been years since I'd hidden his flask, and I wasn't eager to revisit the last time. Four years ago, Daddy'd bumbled a case after spending most of the weekend glued to a bottle. When the main witness Daddy was supposed to meet after Sunday church fled on account of Daddy was hung over and forgot to show up, I heard Daddy curse loud enough to shake the dirt off a field crow. It wasn't that Daddy had missed a witness meeting, it was without that witness and the telltale ball cap the witness had seen the rapist wearing, Daddy had no case.

The rapist walked, and it wasn't a week later when he found another ten-year-old over in Mallardsburg and had his way with her, leaving her broken-boned and laid up in the hospital. Word got around about Daddy missing his meeting, and folks did some sideway talking when he was out of earshot.

When Daddy went to visit the Mallardsburg girl in the hospital, he took along a big cutting of Grammy Essie's blue hydrangeas and a fistful of field daisies. That night after he got home, I watched him bust all his whiskey bottles against the side of the barn. I took the silver flask from inside his jacket and ran and buried it under the front porch. He hadn't tried to claim it or buy another bottle since.

"Daddy, come in and have some tea. Too hot out here to be sitting in a car."

He straightened and I saw it was only the car keys in his hand. "Coming," he called back. Relieved, a ragged breath whisked past my lips. The rage I'd unloaded at the crime scene had left me drained and I didn't have the energy to fight any more battles. I grabbed the doorjamb for support and shot one final glance over my shoulder.

When I saw his foot hit the gravel drive, I slipped into the house, letting the screen door bang behind me, and made my way up the narrow stairs. I was suddenly desperate for my bed. My flip-flops smacked against hundred-year-old hardwoods as I hurried down the hall to my room and flung myself onto the mattress. Balling up Grammy Essie's old chenille coverlet in my fist, I pressed it to my forehead and kneaded my thoughts. After a while, I turned over on my side and studied the small picture frame on the nightstand. It was a Polaroid snapshot of me, four years old and sitting on Mama's lap in the middle of Daddy's big ol' sunflower field. Our eternal smiles, bright as the huge golden flowers that seemed to have tilted to blow petal-kisses down upon us. I fell asleep, drawn into a maze of sunflower fields, both beautiful and terrifying.

Sometime later, I managed to pull myself out of my deep sleep and answer the knocks at my door. "Baby," Daddy said softly, "come on down and let me fix you supper."

I bolted up and checked the alarm clock. "Why didn't you wake me? It's after five." I slipped on my flip-flops. "Not hungry, but I'll start your supper."

He held his hand up and slowly shifted his weight to the other leg. "I can fire the grill. You take a break."

I knew he had an old knee injury from his school days. It'd been acting up more in the last years, though he never talked about it, just let his fingers worry it a lot when sitting.

"I don't mind," I said, patting his shoulder as I moved past him. "I thawed out chops this morning. It won't take long to fry 'em up for you." I hurried down the steps, needing to do something routine to feel normal.

I went into the kitchen and put on the apron that was hanging on the tack beside the back door. I fumbled with the apron strings. For a second my head felt weighted as I tried to complete the simple task of tying the knot. Then I realized my footsteps had mimicked Mama's yesterday. My grip weakened, my fingers stopped working, and the apron slipped to the floor.

* * *

Thrilled to show Mama the birthday present, and my superb driving skills, I rushed over to her house yesterday (probably a little faster than Daddy would've liked) and was surprised to find a silver Mercedes sitting in her drive.

After knocking softly on the door so I wouldn't wake up a passed-out Tommy, I waited. When I didn't get a response, I edged open the door and peeked inside.

Genevieve was asleep in her playpen. Careful to not let the screen door clap, I stepped in and crossed the living room to go check on my baby half sister. She lay sprawled out with a faded pink blanket snuggled under her chin. I couldn't help feeling a little resentment that she had Mama all to herself and whenever she wanted. That she'd never have to call to make an appointment, or sneak around to see her. But, again, at the price of Tommy . . . I sighed and placed a fold of blanket over her little chubby leg and smiled down at her face. Then I heard a sharp smack in the kitchen. I stood abruptly, frozen. Surely Mama would've called if Tommy was awake.

Genevieve rolled over on her stomach, snoring softly. I took off my flip-flops, my wide bell-bottom jeans swish-swashing as I padded over to the kitchen's wooden French door.

I placed my hands lightly on the door and leaned in to listen. A man spoke in an angry whisper, his words flying fast. "Ella," he hissed, "as a banker's daughter, you damn well know your numbers. I'm tired of waiting for that Rooster Run ledger."

A murmur leaked past the door.

"Ella, no more excuses! You best get my ledger tidied and back to me real quick," the man said. "And, if I find out you're lying, stashing away one red cent of Rooster Run's money, my money, you'll have more to worry about than a couple of little red marks—"

Muffled exchanges. Then, another sharp slap.

The man said, "I've been putting up with you moonlighting over at that clown sheriff's office, but don't you go forgetting who butters your bread. And if you're wondering who has the biggest—"

“Put that gun away, Roy, please,” Mama whispered.

“I do,” he growled.

My legs jellied.

Heated whispers.

The kitchen door flew open; the hard smack of wood against my forehead, watering my eyes. I stumbled back, surprised to see Roy McGee standing inches from me. He was a handsome man dressed in fine clothes, not the dirtbag I’d been expecting from what I’d just heard.

“Mr. McGee,” I sputtered, lowering my gaze to the floor, “I . . . uh, I came to call on Mama.” I raised my head and met cold blue eyes. “I didn’t mean . . .”

McGee glared like an old barn cat, disturbed from its catch. I tried to look away, but he hooked his thumb under my chin and squeezed hard. “Better put some ice on that noggin, looks like you’ve got yourself a snooper-scrape, and a goose egg popping up. You know what happens to snoops, don’t you, gal?”

“Let her go, Roy!” Mama begged, close on McGee’s heels. McGee’s eyes never left mine. “Get my numbers, Ella.”

“Roy, please go.”

He turned to Mama, lifted a lock of hair that clung to her breast, and stroked. Mama grimaced and looked away. He gave a sharp tug, before slipping out the door.

We stood there in the living room staring at each other for what seemed like forever, the baby’s soft breath the only sound.

The wind blew the door shut and the baby let out a cord of hiccupped snorts. I carefully touched my forehead and, sure enough, felt the tenderness of a bump.

Mama moved in quick, leading me by the arm into the kitchen. She set me down at the Formica table. Digging into the side pocket of her floral sundress, she pulled out a rubber band and swept her long chestnut curls up into a tight bun. She wouldn’t meet my eyes, but I could see that hers were damp, troubled, as if a storm had pulled up the ocean’s depth.

“Here, Mudas, before we get started”—she shifted her eyes and quickly patted her side for another rubber band—“let’s

ponytail your hair. It's such a hot day. My, it's grown at least two inches this summer, and, oh, look at those honey highlights the sun's brought out. Beautiful!"

I took the band and twirled it between my fingers. "Mama?"
Silence.

Somewhere near Knobmole Hill the whistle of an afternoon train broke the stillness, its steady *click-clack* echoing over wooden cross ties.

"Mama, what's going on with—"

"Sugar, let me get you an ice pack." She opened the freezer and got out a dented aluminum ice tray, dumping its contents into an empty bread bag and handing it to me.

"Mama?"

"Oh, aspirin! I should get you some aspirin. And a Band-Aid. There's a tiny cut on your head." She rummaged through a kitchen drawer and pulled out a packet of Goody's Powder.

"Mama, I don't need aspirin powders or bandages. I'm worried about you. And where's Tommy?"

"Let me get the water—"

"No, Mama, talk to me." I glanced over my shoulder. "Is Tommy here?"

She lowered herself into the chair next to mine. "Tommy woke up earlier than usual and took a ride over to his cousins in Dayre County. We have all day to visit, sweetheart." I grinned a little, and for a moment pushed aside the worry that had settled deep in me. "And, sugar, before I forget, we need to get your back-to-school shopping done. Are you going to need a track uniform this year?"

"No, I don't think so." I sighed. "Mama, why was Mr. McGee—"

"Why not? Is it because of that coach?" she back-burned Mr. McGee.

"Sort of. Coach Grider says us girls embarrass him and it ain't right for females to play sports. He's angry about that new law being passed."

"I'm not surprised. I expected him to fight the Title Nine.

Your daddy and me can come to school and have a talk with the principal.”

“No, don’t. It’s fine.”

“Somebody needs to set that coach straight!”

“Mama, don’t go to Coach. Please don’t.”

“Okay, okay,” she said, shaking her head. “But, remember, you’re letting him win. It’s your right! You can best that coach’s boys any day. . . . Be happy to talk to Coach Grider—”

“No, Mama. Please. The last thing I need is you or Daddy going over there and making a fuss and—”

She held up a hand. “All right, Mudas. Just keep up your good grades. You can practice track on your own, sugar. Once you girls get into college there’ll be a lot more opportunities, you’ll see. By the way, are you and your girlfriends planning on going to the State Fair?”

Friend. Singular. “ThommaLyn’s mama said she’d drive us. We’re supposed to meet up soon and make plans.”

“Will Mrs. Green be taking a carload?”

I brushed my toe over the curling linoleum and shrugged, embarrassed. I couldn’t even imagine what it’d be like having more than one friend, a carload of girls to share in all the fun. I’d come close to something like that in my freshman year when Charlotte Moss had told me to join her during lunch at her popular table when school started up again. For over two weeks, I’d lie in bed each night worrying up the most fidgetiness of Freddie Fidgets. Getting my clothes ready for my first day. Practicing things to say—and how I’d act at that table. I’d fretted one year of shine off my pine boards and at least an inch of glaze from my mirror. It didn’t work. I quickly found out that she was one of those friends who’d accept you and reject you between a screen door’s closing clap.

The second week of school, Charlotte invited me to her house for supper. After we finished washing the dishes, I excused myself to call home for my ride. That’s when I overheard her parents whispering about “bottle, divorce, and Daddy.”

Mrs. Moss had hissed to her husband, “He drinks. And I

won't have Charlotte hanging around someone from an unstable home."

Mr. Moss weakly defended, "But she's Essie's granddaughter."

Then Mrs. Moss said, "Ella's daughter."

Shame burned holes in my cheeks so badly that when I got home, Daddy feared I had caught a cold, and dug out the thermometer.

The next day at school I showed up at Charlotte's popular table, but she waved me away and called someone else over to take my spot.

"Mudas, are those kids still calling you 'narc'? Making fun 'cause your daddy's the town prosecutor? I can call their parents and have a word with them. I'll stop by school and talk to your teachers in September."

"No, no, Mama, it's really no big deal. Really, it's my last year . . . I'm used to it." I was. Twelve years used to it.

"You can get use to hanging if you hang long enough. I can talk with the principal—"

"Mama, it's okay. . . . Please don't." I looked at her worn, dated dress, stained with sour milk and baby food. "You can't just waltz into my classes. I told you, conferences are for after school."

"I haven't been to any." Mama pressed down the folds of her dress. "You keep forgetting to give me the dates. You know, Jingles wouldn't mind letting me off work to meet with your teachers. Tommy will never know. Most evenings he's at work."

"Well, we don't have many and, 'sides, Daddy always does school business by phone. And school's fine, Mama. Just fine." I reached over and pressed the lie neatly over her hand.

She squeezed back. "Are you seeing a boy?"

"No, not really . . . Well, 'cept for Bobby Marshall. He's been hanging with me a bit. We're just friends." I wasn't quite ready to share yet. But, a very cute friend, I thought, and more polished than some of the western Kentucky boys who seemed to have been fished up from mud-bottomed ponds. He was different, more like the freshwater rainbow trout I used to catch out at Tuckspit Creek when Papaw took me fishing. Born three

counties over in Chetburg, Bobby and his family had moved up north to New York City when he was seven and then finally settled back in Kentucky for the last semester of his junior year. In those nine years of citying-up, he'd scraped off most of the rural rust, but had somehow managed to hold on to his country soul.

I'd visited Mama enough when she lived in Nashville and Chicago to grab a bit of the worldly shine that came with city living. But, mostly, I'd clung to Grammy Essie's handmade apron strings and held on to my Kentucky rural. It was something Bobby and I seemed to share—the pull of both worlds.

Two months ago, he'd bumped into me in front of Town Square. We'd spent the day talking and people-watching on Liar's Bench. Before we parted, he'd asked if I wanted to go swimming in Darby's pond sometime. Maybe fish a little, too. We'd been hanging ever since. ThommaLyn and I used to be attached at the hip, but things had changed since she'd started seeing Paul Jameson. It was nice to have a new friend.

"Bobby Marshall, hmm?" Mama pulled me out of my thoughts. "I don't think I've ever talked with Mrs. Marshall."

"They moved here about four months ago. His daddy got a job transfer of sorts. And they don't live in town. Their house is way out past Dark Branch Bridge, near the county line."

"Your eyes are grinning."

I closed them and smiled. "Mama, stop it."

"You like him? Is he smitten with you? Has he asked you to be his girl?"

"Mama, no! He's a friend. For Pete's sake, he's never even kissed me." My cheeks burned. Eager to change the subject, I dusted imaginary breadcrumbs off the table, glanced around, and finally lit upon Mama's fresh bruises. I reached out to touch the reddish handprint on her face. She flinched and pulled away. "Mama, what happened? What was Mr. McGee doing here? I heard y'all arguing. And look, there's an old bruise on your neck. . . . Has Tommy been whooping up on you again?"

"I'm fine, Mudas, now don't you go prying into adult business. Roy's one of Tommy's bosses."

"Is he your boss, too?"

“Don’t be silly, sugar. Tommy’s working part-time out at McGee’s farm, along with his bartending job in Braggs Fork. I try to help out when he needs me to look over Mr. McGee’s books, that’s all.”

“Did you lose his ledger? Is that why he hurt you?”

She waved her arm in the air dismissively. “It was an accident.”

“The kids at school say Mr. McGee is a bad man. Daddy says so, too.” I set the ice bag on the table. “I heard he runs a fancy-pants compound out there on his horse farm ’bout once a month for Kentucky big shots to gamble on cockfights and pick up whores. And—”

Mama clamped her hands over my shoulders and gave a stern shake. “Language, little Miss Mouth of the South! And don’t be spreading gossip.” She wagged her finger. “It doesn’t do anyone any good to pluck their chickens in the wind,” she admonished.

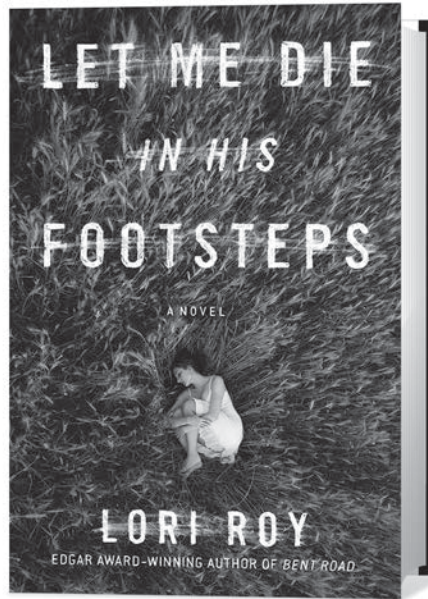
A blaze of shame leaped up to lick my ears. “I didn’t mean—”

“Some things are best left alone.” She stood and pressed down the wrinkles of her dress, her warning that the discussion was over. “C’mon,” she coaxed, her face softening, “let’s get that bump down and celebrate your birthday. I’ll be working tomorrow and today is my only day off this week.”

She walked over to the stove. “I’m making your favorite dinner.” She smiled as she pulled out a casserole dish from the cabinet. “And after the baby wakes up, maybe we can take a ride in that fancy car of yours.”

She poured us each a glass of tea, and I couldn’t help but notice it wasn’t her usual refreshment. Still, she smiled just the same as when she’d drink the vodka, only a little more jittery, but a lot brighter. And she wasn’t running to her medicine cabinet, pulling out the codeine bottle. . . . Something had changed.

She winked and reached for her apron that was hanging on the back of the pantry door. I watched her carefully knot the matching family apron we’d sewn together right before the divorce. She smoothed down the ruffles and patted down the heart pocket I’d insisted on sewing onto hers. She’d done the same for mine.



Perfect for readers of William Faulkner and Harper Lee.



In this spellbinding and suspenseful novel, Edgar Award-winner Lori Roy wrests from a Southern town the secrets of two families touched by an evil that has passed between generations.

On a dark Kentucky night in 1952 exactly halfway between her fifteenth and sixteenth birthdays, Annie Holleran crosses into forbidden territory. Everyone knows Hollerans don't go near Baines, not since Joseph Carl was buried two decades before, but, armed with a silver-handled flashlight, Annie runs through her family's lavender fields toward the well on the Baines' place. At the stroke of midnight, she gazes into the water in search of her future. Not finding what she had hoped for, she turns from the well, and when the body she sees there in the moonlight is discovered come morning, Annie will have much to explain and a past to account for.

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1

1952—ANNIE

ANNIE HOLLERAN HEARS him before she sees him. Even over the drone of the cicadas, she knows it's Ryce Fulkerson, and he's pedaling this way. That's his bike, all right, creaking and whining. He'll have turned off the main road and will be standing straight up as he uses all his weight, bobbing side to side, to pump those pedals and force that bike up and over the hill. In a few moments, he'll reach the top where the ground levels out, and that front tire of his will be wobbling and groaning and drawing a crooked line in the soft, dry dirt.

They're singing in the trees again today, those cicadas. A week ago, they clawed their way out of the ground, seventeen years' worth of them, and now their skins hang from the oaks, hardened husks with tiny claws and tiny, round heads. One critter called out to another and then another until their pulsing songs

made Annie press both hands over her ears, tuck her head between her knees, and cry out for them to stop. Stop it now. All these many days, there's been something in the air, a spark, a crackle, something that's felt a terrible lot like trouble coming, and it's been much like the weight of those cicadas, thousands upon thousands of them crying out to one another.

Annie has known all morning Ryce would be coming. It's why she's been sitting on this step and waiting on him for near an hour. She oftentimes knows a thing is coming before it has come. It's part of the curse—or blessing, if Grandma is to be believed—of having the know-how.

They both have the know-how, Annie and Aunt Juna. That's what Grandma calls it. The know-how. It floats just above the lavender bushes, trickles from the moss hanging in the oaks, drifts like a fallen leaf down the Lone Fork River, just waiting for someone like Annie or Aunt Juna to scoop it or snatch it or pluck it from the air. The two of them share the know-how because Aunt Juna is Annie's real mother. Grandma has it too. She says there's no evil in the know-how, though some are frightened of a thing they know little about. It's my gift to you, Grandma is all the time saying, but that's not true. The know-how passes from mother to daughter. Everyone knows that. Annie also has Aunt Juna's black eyes. Not dark brown or almost black. But *black*, through and through. Folks believe that's where the evil lives. In the eyes. It's Annie's fear, has been all her life, that evil passes from mother to daughter too.

Most days the know-how is like a whisper or a sigh, but with the approach of Annie's half birthday—her day of ascension, they call it—the know-how has swelled, and this something in the air has made Annie startle for no reason, hold her breath when she thought she'd heard something she ought not have heard. All her

years, fifteen and a half of them when she celebrates her day of ascension tomorrow, Annie Holleran has lived with the fear of turning out like her Aunt Juna. All her years, Annie has lived with the fear that Aunt Juna will one day come home.

Pushing herself off the bottom step and not bothering to smooth her skirt or straighten her blouse, Annie walks into the middle of the drive, kicking up dust with her bare feet. With every step, her middle caves and her shoulders slouch, Annie's favored posture since she sprouted last summer. That's what Mama called it . . . sprouting. And ever since, Mama has been telling Annie to stand straight and show some pride, as if being taller than most every other girl should be a prideful thing.

In addition to nagging about improper posture, Mama will be after Annie with soap and a rag by lunchtime, and she'll remind Annie no more going barefoot once a girl has ascended.

"Thought you'd be working today," Annie says as Ryce's bike slows to a stop. She crosses her arms and hugs herself, another way to shrink an inch or two.

Ryce kicks out his right leg and lets his bike tip until he's carrying his weight on that one foot. He's wearing dark trousers, one leg rolled up to his shin so it doesn't catch in his chain, double-knotted leather boots, and a white undershirt covered in the same dark smudges that mar his forearms, hands, and face.

"Lunch break," Ryce says. He's holding on to his handlebar with one hand. In the other, he holds a crumpled white kerchief. "All the fellows get one."

This is the summer Ryce will buy himself a truck. He said the same last summer, but his daddy put all the money Ryce earned setting tobacco and picking worms in the bank and said college was but a few years away and it damn sure didn't pay for itself.

"You come here expecting I'd feed you?" As has happened

so often in the past days and weeks, the nasty words pop out before Annie can stop them. She crosses her arms. In addition to shaving another inch off her frame, this is also a fine way of hiding her chest so Ryce won't notice it's not one bit bigger than the last time he saw her. No matter what he says, Annie catches Ryce sometimes staring.

"Didn't come expecting no food," Ryce says, studying that crumpled kerchief like it's something important. "Come to see if you was going tonight."

"Might. Might not."

"What does that mean? 'Might. Might not.'"

"Might not want to."

"You ought want to go," Ryce says.

The sun has lightened his hair a shade or two, and now it's the exact same color as his pale-brown eyes. Sometimes, Annie catches herself staring too.

"Says who?" Annie asks.

"Every girl, that's who," Ryce says, tugging on the edges of that kerchief. He's got something wrapped up inside, and because of the way he's using only his fingertips, it must be some kind of treasure to him.

When, several days ago, Annie first noticed the spark in the air, Grandma had smoothed the tangles in Annie's ordinary yellow hair, given her a squirt of lavender-scented lotion to rub into her hands and elbows, and said not to worry. That spark was not a sign of trouble-to-come. No, indeed. That spark signaled the arrival of the lavender.

Annie is almost of age, midway between fifteen and sixteen, and so is finally coming into her own. She's ascending into womanhood, though she prefers to think she's ascending into adulthood. "Womanhood" makes her think of the wide-bottomed women

who sit in church, tissues always in hand to wipe clean the noses of whatever children crawl across their laps. “Adulthood” sounds not so confining as “womanhood.”

All kinds of yearning come with a girl’s ascension—so says Grandma—beautiful, glorious yearning that will twist up a girl’s insides, wring them this way and that. Being as she has the know-how, Annie will feel things now she’s never before felt. She’ll feel things the ordinary girls will not. The arrival of the lavender is only one of them. Acres of it grow around Grandma’s house, acres and acres, and the sweet smell has been gathering since last year’s crop was cut. There is coming, Grandma said, a single moment when those flowers, rows and rows, mounds and mounds, will explode into full bloom. Yearning, Grandma had said. You’ll soon know much about yearning.

Ryce is right about one thing: All the girls in Hayden County look forward to midnight of the day halfway between their fifteenth and sixteenth birthdays. They buy special nightgowns and new cotton robes. They stay up late to curl their hair and dab on a coat of pink lipstick, and as midnight approaches, these girls of Hayden County sneak out of their houses, travel to the nearest well, usually the well at the Fulkersons’ place, and peek down into it in hopes of seeing the reflection of their intended. They huddle around the well, the girl who will that very night ascend and her best friends or closest relations, while their mamas and daddies stand at a distance, smoking a cigar or sipping whiskey from a coffee cup. The mamas will call out, because it’s the mamas who worry most about who their girls will marry, “Who you see down there?” The girls will giggle, squint into the darkness, wave their flashlights in one another’s eyes, and call out the name of a favorite boy.

“Could ride up here after supper, if you want,” Ryce says.

“After everyone’s in bed. Your bike working? We could ride down together.”

“Why would I want that, Ryce Fulkerson?”

Ryce’s daddy is the sheriff, and before that, his granddaddy was sheriff, and hand to God, his grandma too, which makes Ryce think he’ll be sheriff one day. It makes Ryce think he’s more of a man than he really is.

“Just offering,” he says. “Thought you might not want to make the trip alone.”

For the past ten years, most every girl has made her way to the Fulkersons’ on her day of ascension. Mrs. Fulkerson makes a big show of keeping up the well at their place. In the spring, she plants marigolds around it, and in the winter, she makes Ryce shovel a path through the snow. Sheriff Fulkerson has even been known to pace nearby as a girl looks into the well, one hand resting on the handgun hanging at his waist because a person never knows what might happen when the spirits are being conjured. Even though it’s dark, he’ll wear his hat and march back and forth because nothing is more important than the virtue of the young women of Hayden County. Then he’ll share a sip of whiskey with the dads and uncles and whoever else may have come to bear witness. Grandma says they never had such pageantry in her day and doesn’t much appreciate the sheriff making light of tradition. Daddy says there isn’t a thing wrong with a bit of pageantry or a good shot of whiskey.

“Not such a long trip if I go to the Baines’ place,” Annie says, nodding up toward the tobacco barn at the top of the rise behind her house. “There’s a perfectly fine well right up there. Still got water in it, so I hear.”

Everyone knows there’s only one thing beyond the Hollerans’ place, and that’s the Baines’ place. Everyone also knows Hollerans

don't go near Baines. Aunt Juna was the start of all the hatred between the families, and even though she's been gone a good many years, the hatred has stayed put.

Juna Crowley is a legend. She's the one the girls sing about as their jump ropes slap hot concrete. Over and over the girls of Hayden County chant . . . Eyes like coal, she'll lead you astray . . . How many Baines will die this day? And the ropes swing around and around until their fibers turn frayed and prickly to the touch. Last summer, Dorothy Howard visited her grandma in Topeka, Kansas, and she said even those girls all the way up there were singing about Juna Crowley. One Baine, two Baines, one hundred and four Baines, those Topeka girls chanted. And if they're chanting in Topeka, they must be chanting all over the country.

Course, there were, are, only seven Baine brothers. No telling how many are still alive. Aunt Juna only killed one of them. Some twenty years ago, she saw to it Joseph Carl hanged by his neck until dead, and all these many years later, Browerton is still the town known for—known *only* for—being the town to last hang a man in plain sight for all to see.

Just last month, Arleen Kellerman caught three of her grandsons, who were visiting from Atlanta, Georgia, as they were about to kick the box out from under the neighbor boy. The rope was strung up over the pole that holds one end of her clothesline, the other end anchored to the side of her house. Every one of those boys got whipped. The one dressed up as Aunt Juna got the worst of it.

“Your daddy ain't going to let you go to the Baines' place,” Ryce says, smiling in a way that lets Annie know she's a damn fool for saying such a thing. “Your mama ain't going to allow that either.”

“What makes you think I care what my daddy says? Or my mama?”

“Don’t think you should go to the Baines’ place, that’s all.”

Still holding on to that kerchief, Ryce rolls his bike backward a few feet until he can see around the side of the house. He’ll be wondering if a person can see the Baine place from here, but he won’t be able to. He won’t see it unless he runs up the hill behind the house and past Grandpa’s tobacco barn. From there, he would see the rock fence that separates the two places, and he’d also see the well. And he might see old Cora Baine, the only Baine left, sitting in her rocker, a shotgun cradled in her lap.

It’s only been a week since school let out and Annie last saw Ryce, but already he looks different, bigger, taller, thicker somehow. The neck of his undershirt is stretched from him having used it as a kerchief all morning. He’ll have been tugging it up over his mouth, even chewing on it until it droops and frays. It’s a nasty habit, and his mama will get on him for it when he goes home for supper. And while the neck of that undershirt sags, the rest of it is all the sudden too small. It pulls across his chest and looks to be cutting him under the arms. His jawline has squared off some since school ended, and his nose has sprawled, no longer has the ball on the end that the women of town were all the time tweaking. Or maybe it’s his overgrown hair. Hanging down past his ears, it slims him out in the face, and his skin is darker for having been out in the sun all day every day for a week. Damn it all, Annie looks just the same.

The spark that has nagged at Annie all these days has been like the ache in her legs that Mama calls growing pains or the stings that speckle Annie’s calves when she gets into a patch of nettles. It’s made her irritable, disagreeable, most especially with Ryce Fulkerson. When Annie told Grandma that her yearning felt nothing like a yearning should feel and that she didn’t much like it, Grandma smiled, even laughed. She laughed harder still when Annie said she most certainly did not yearn for Ryce Fulkerson

because he was a gosh-darn fool, when what she really wanted to say was that he was a Goddamn fool, but Annie knew better than to curse in front of Grandma. This made Grandma throw her head back and laugh right out loud.

Annie would have stomped away from anyone else who laughed that way, but not Grandma. Grandma's laugh made Annie want to cry because the yearning and the coming of the lavender and the feeling that something was lurking and not wanting to turn evil like Aunt Juna had stuffed her full and there was no room left. Grandma knew this and stopped her laughing, stroked one hand over Annie's cheek, and said this is exactly how a yearning should feel.

"I suppose I'll be going where I please and if I please," Annie says, and this time she feels the nastiness coming but can't stop herself from spitting it out. "One thing's for certain. I damn sure won't be seeing you down in that well."

"Course you won't," Ryce says. "Lizzy Morris already seen me. Don't suppose a man can be a husband to two women. Don't suppose he'd want to."

At the mention of Lizzy Morris, Annie turns on one bare heel and walks toward the kitchen. Lizzy Morris is one of those girls whose hair is always brushed, pulled back, and tied off with a bow, a Goddamn bow. Isn't that Lizzy Morris a lovely girl, Mama is all the time saying when they happen upon Lizzy at the café or in church or at the market.

"I figure that's a good thing then," Annie turns and says. "Hate to think you'd grow old alone." Then she marches on toward the house.

"Hey," Ryce calls out. "Hold up. I brought this for you."

Annie takes a few steps back toward Ryce. He smells of wet dirt and soggy leaves. Been pulling tobacco from the beds, most likely.

“Thought it might be helpful.” He smiles and nods, urging her to come closer. When she’s within arm’s reach, he gives the crumpled kerchief a shake and something drops in Annie’s palm.

“What on earth is this, Ryce Fulkerson?”

But Annie knows what it is. She knows exactly what it is. She already has the same hidden up in her top drawer just behind her Sunday stockings. It’s the white, shriveled body of a dead frog.

“Not that I think you’ll need it,” Ryce says. “But just in case.”

Annie closes her hand around the chalky body and swivels on that same bare heel. She must have told Ryce about the dead frog; otherwise he’d have never known. Men, boys, don’t have the know-how. He means for her to grind it into a fine white powder and sprinkle it on the head of whatever boy she sees down in that well tonight. The powder of a dead frog will make the boy love her even if he isn’t inclined toward Annie, which is likely because as hard as Annie tries to say her pleases and thank-yous like Mama is all the time insisting on, and as hard as Annie tries to brush her hair and wear clean clothes and smile the way her sister, Caroline, does, and as much as she tries not to look a person straight on with her black eyes because they have a way of frightening folks, most people are still not inclined toward her. This dead frog will make her intended love her despite her being doomed to turn out just like Aunt Juna.

Squeezing her fist as tightly as she can, Annie crushes the small body and lets the bits and pieces drop at her feet.

“I damn sure won’t be coming to your place tonight, Ryce Fulkerson,” she says, walks up the stairs, across the porch, and inside without looking back.

2

AFTER THE GIRLS of Hayden County look down into the Fulker-sons' well and walk away claiming to have seen the boy they are of a mind to marry, they begin to comb their hair differently, wear an apron when helping their mamas put out supper, fold their laundry without being asked. And they begin to talk about a first kiss.

Some of the girls, in the weeks after having their fates decided, are comforted to know they'll not be spinsters like that one great-aunt on their daddy's side or the cousin they see only at Christmas. Those girls, who fool even themselves into believing they saw a face down in that well, will save their first kiss for the boy they're destined to marry.

Other girls, in the weeks after looking in the well, start tugging with one hooked finger as if a noose is wrapped around their necks. They want a first kiss from some other boy. And then another kiss from another boy. They want to stall their future because once they say I do, they know there will be no others.

No matter which path a girl takes, all conversations turn to

the first kiss once that half birthday has passed, and the girls who don't manage a first kiss shortly after staring into that hole are questioned daily. If she's a pretty girl, the boys loiter nearby, hoping to be the face she saw. They roll their shoulders back, lead with their chests, and open doors for her. If the girl is a homely sort, the boys pay her no mind and get on with their tiresome ways. In the very worst case, as with Emily Anne Tylerson, the boys shove one another into her path in hopes of dooming another fellow to the first kiss.

Annie may not be destined for the treatment that drove Emily Anne to tears, or perhaps she is, but she is certainly bound to be a girl who will draw indifference when she returns to school in the fall. While every boy in the county was tripping over his boots to be Lizzy Morris's first kiss, not a one of them will care to be Annie's, and that is something she will not risk. Not the looks of pity, the daily questions, the whispers and giggles behind cupped hands, or the dust in her face when the boys run from her path.

AT EXACTLY 11:15, Annie slides her legs over the edge of the mattress, scoots until her feet touch the floor, and holds her breath, because maybe that will stop the springs from creaking. Twice already, Mama has opened the door, letting in just enough light to see that Annie was flesh and bone and not just a pile of pillows stuffed under her blankets. Each time, Annie drew in deep, full breaths so Mama would believe she was asleep.

For the past month, Mama has been talking about the foolishness of looking into wells. Annie agreed straightaway, and that was a mistake. Mama is always suspicious of Annie being agreeable. Next Mama started offering to drive Annie down to the Fulkersons' place

if she was going to insist on partaking in the tradition. When Annie refused, again saying she thought it was all foolishness, Mama reminded Annie there is a perfectly good well right here on Grandma's farm. No need even to leave home. But it isn't a perfectly good well. It dried up years ago, long before Annie, Caroline, Mama, and Daddy moved in with Grandma, and the week they unpacked, Daddy covered it over with plywood and stones. No matter how perfectly good that well might have once been, it doesn't seem likely a person could see her intended's reflection in a boarded-over, dried-up well.

But Annie didn't say any of those things. Instead she told Mama she had no need for looking into Grandma's well or Ryce Fulkerson's well or any other well. She wanted Mama, and Daddy too, to believe so they wouldn't insist on tagging along and asking her which boy she saw or was he handsome and strong. Mostly she didn't want them coming along because maybe there isn't a future husband for Annie. Maybe, no matter how hard Annie tries to do as Mama says or make herself out to be just like Caroline, Annie is doomed to an evil nature, and maybe there is no intended for a girl with such a future. But Mama has checked on Annie twice, so it's clear she had not been convincing.

While Mama would have no part of Annie crossing onto Baine property and would certainly forbid it if she knew Annie was considering such a thing, the know-how is what frightens Mama most. Looking down into a well and seeing one's intended might be foolishness for the other girls, but it's something else for people like Annie and Aunt Juna. Annie feels things that aren't hers to feel. Aunt Juna was the same. Surely, she still is. Everything Annie does smells like, sounds like, looks like, tastes like, something she's done before, and she has a way of knowing how things will end before their end has come. You *have* done

that before, Mama will sometimes say, or we all knew that dog was going to die or that tree was bound to fall with the next rain. Grandma says this knowing settles in at birth, ripens for fifteen and a half years, and on the day a girl ascends, the know-how is fully grown.

“Thought you might decide not to go.”

The springs in Caroline’s bed and her brass headboard creak as she swings her legs over the edge of the mattress and slides her feet into the cloth slippers that await her at the side of the bed.

“Don’t you switch on that light,” Annie says as she opens her nightstand’s top drawer. “Hush and go back to sleep.”

“I’ll do no such thing,” Caroline says, flipping on the light anyway. “I want to come too. Please, Annie. Let me come too.”

Annie reaches one hand into the drawer. Feeling nothing, she pats the bottom and squeezes her hand inside until her fingers brush against the back panel.

“Looking for this?” Caroline says.

The light Annie had thought was coming from the bedside lamp is instead coming from a long-handled silver flashlight. It’s the same flashlight Annie took from Daddy’s shed earlier in the day.

“Give it,” Annie says.

“Be happy to.” Caroline waves the stream of light across Annie’s face. Even straight out of bed, Caroline’s long, dark hair is smooth as if freshly brushed. All that moving about stirs up the sweet smell that always clings to Caroline—roses, freshly squeezed lemons, and lavender. “You can have this light right now,” she says, “if you take me with you to the Fulkersons’.”

“I can’t do that,” Annie says, looking straight down that funnel of light. She stands, slowly unfolding her legs. The yellow stream follows her.

Once she reaches her full height, a good five inches taller than Caroline, Annie jams her hands in the pockets of her sweater and pulls them out one at a time. In her right hand, she holds one of Grandma's white utility candles, its wick brand-new, waxy and white. In her left, she holds three matchsticks she also took from the shed. This is what Mama must mean when she tells Annie to have some pride in her height. Being taller in this particular instance is pleasing.

"Don't need that flashlight," Annie says. "These'll work just fine."

She lets Caroline get a good look at the candle and matches before shoving them back into her pockets.

"Besides," Annie says, "I ain't going to the Fulkersons' place. Going to the Baines'."

Annie hadn't been certain until that moment. She had thought she might try to push aside those rocks and the board Daddy stacked on top of Grandpa's well. Annie had assumed a girl couldn't see her intended in a dried-up well, but she does have the know-how after all, and so maybe she could see her intended where others likely could not. She would normally ask Grandma such a question, but not this time. Annie had also stowed her bike out near the road so she could ride down to Ryce Fulkerson's well if need be. But now Caroline wants to come along, and Caroline is a sister who has a way of always getting the better of things.

"You are not going to the Baines'," Caroline says, lowering herself onto her bed but not before smoothing under her nightgown as if taking a seat on a church pew. "Mama and Daddy'll have our hides for going up there."

"Then don't come," Annie says. "No one'll have your hide for staying right here asleep in your own bed."

A whole brood of Baines once lived up there. Seven Baine brothers, each one larger than the next, and each one, except Joseph Carl, chased away by his own mama. Keeping an ever-watchful eye out for the Baines has been a way of life for the Hollerans, a habit long in the making, one that started before Annie was born. If it rattles, Daddy taught both of them by the time they could walk, choose a different path. If it looks like a Baine, do the same. The last Baine brother left Hayden County when Annie was eight or nine, but still Daddy tells them . . . if it looks like a Baine, do the same, which has always left Annie feeling like someday, one of those Baines will come back.

Clutching the flashlight to her chest, Caroline turns the cone of light on herself. It catches her under her chin, and the shadows make her eyes sink into her head and her cheekbones rise high and grow more slender.

“What if Mama comes to check?” Caroline says. And just like at church, she crosses her ankles but not her legs. “You’ll get a whipping. Me too, for letting you go. What am I supposed to tell her?”

“You’ll tell her nothing,” Annie says, “because you’ll be asleep. I’ll be there and back before you know it.”

Caroline stands and lifts one bare foot, threatening to stomp it. “I’ll wake the house if you don’t take me.”

Caroline is trying her best to be cantankerous. Her fine manners and tender nature never struck Annie as a curse, but perhaps they are. Annie finally lets herself blink, the light glittering in her lashes, and wonders if all people as beautiful and polished as Caroline struggle to plant their flags. Caroline wants to stomp that foot of hers, but she won’t. Grandma is always saying that a person has to know how to plant her flag, and planting flags takes gumption. Grandma also says gumption is no kin to beauty. She

says this so Annie will know a person can have gumption without having a pleasing face. She says this because Annie is not the beautiful one.

Caroline has always been the better of the two sisters. “Don’t let bygones get the best of you,” folks will sometimes say to Annie when spotting her and Caroline in town. And then they turn their attentions to Caroline, tug on the end of one of her braids or wrap an arm around her shoulders. “No reason you can’t be just like this one.” Folks have been saying it, or some variation, for as long as Annie can remember.

“Your time hasn’t come,” Annie says, staring straight into the light Caroline has pointed back in her direction and willing herself not to squint or blink. “You’re not old enough.”

Caroline drops her hands so the light pools at her feet. She is wearing a nightgown handed down from Annie. When Annie was still wearing it, Mama would say it had seen its last day. The cotton had yellowed. The lace had drooped and frayed. Now that Caroline is wearing it, Mama doesn’t say those things anymore. What had looked threadbare and worn on Annie looks elegant on Caroline.

“Please, Annie.”

A year from now, it’ll be Caroline’s time to look into the well, but she knows and Annie knows Mama won’t want Caroline to go, same as she didn’t want Annie to go. The difference between the two is that Caroline always does as Mama says. Caroline going with Annie, even if it is a year too early, might be Caroline’s only chance.

“I’m going to look in that well, Caroline Holleran,” Annie says. And because Caroline is the sister who always gets the better of things and because Annie can’t bear to have a witness to

who she might or might not see in that well, she says, “And unless you want to come with me to the Baines’ place, you ain’t coming along.”

AT THE BOTTOM of the staircase leading to the living room, Annie stops. She can’t see him, Abraham Pace, but she darn sure can hear him. She can smell him too. More and more, Mama shoos Abraham away at the end of an evening. Even after he and Daddy have sipped a good bit of whiskey and smoked a good many cigars, Mama tells him it’s not right he keeps sleeping on their sofa. He’ll be a married man soon enough, and a woman set on marrying a man doesn’t want him sleeping anywhere but in his own bed. Every time Mama tells him, Abraham complains that the gal of his, Abigail Watson, makes her cornbread white and who the hell ever heard of white cornbread. Abigail and her grandparents came to live here from over near Lexington when she was a child. They must like their cornbread white over there, but Abraham likes his yellow with an extra dose of sugar. After a good bit of this complaining, Abraham will finally promise to go home to his own bed next time around.

And yet, that’s definitely Abraham Pace snoring. His stocking feet will be hanging over one end of the sofa, and his head will be wedged at a disagreeable angle on the other end. He’s a large man, tall and broad, likely the tallest and broadest in all of Hayden County, so he doesn’t fit so well.

For the past month, since Mama first started talking about Annie turning of age, Abraham has been telling Annie it was his face her Aunt Juna saw down in the well. Clear as day, she saw me, he has told Annie nearly every day for a month. Said she knew it was me and that I was the one she’d marry. Said that even though

your granddaddy didn't think much of me. And then Abraham would laugh and say what would he think of me now, because, besides being larger than most any man in the county, Abraham owns more land than most any man.

Taking the path she's practiced all day long, Annie crosses through the living room and kitchen. Opening the door slowly, because it does tend to creak, she looks toward the tree where Abraham sometimes ties up that dog of his. Tilly is her name, but tonight, Abraham has left her at home. Once outside, Annie rounds the side of the house and stops there, not knowing why she's stopped but feeling like she's waiting on something or someone. She's waiting on Daddy. He's talked a good bit about there being no one left up at that Baine place to give Annie any trouble, but still he'll follow her.

Daddy knows Annie will be going to the well tonight even though she made yet another speech at the supper table, after a month of like-minded speeches, about half birthdays and ascensions and intended husbands being foolishness. Daddy didn't believe her, and neither did Mama, but Daddy will have made Mama stay in bed and will have told her to let Annie do the thing every other girl gets to do. But Daddy will follow. He won't let Annie know he's there, watching over her, because a man who has gone from tobacco farming to lavender farming knows about things like pride and ego.

She'll run, knees high and arms pumping, until she reaches the tobacco barn. That's her plan. From there, she'll be able to see the Baines' house. She'll see that it's dark, the door closed, the shutters drawn. She'll see that Mrs. Baine isn't sitting on her front porch, rocking in her old rocking chair, a shotgun resting in her lap or propped up against the house within grabbing distance. Folks say that's what she does, day in and day out, in case one of

her boys tries to come back home. And when Annie is sure Mrs. Baine isn't there waiting with a shotgun, she'll run on past the barn, climb the dry-stack rock fence separating the Baines from the Hollerans, hoping it doesn't crumble beneath her, and there, she'll find the well.

Rows of lavender follow the gentle curve of the hillside behind Grandma's house. Daddy may not be happy about growing lavender, but a job worth doing is a job worth doing well. And so the rows are perfectly spaced, and even now that the bushes have sprouted into large mounds and the stalks are tipped with bluish-gray buds, there is still room enough for a person to walk between each row. In a few weeks' time, maybe a month since this spring was cooler than most, the tiny buds will bloom and a rich purple will spread across the hills.

Earlier in the day, Annie had counted out the rows and picked the one that would lead her up the hill and drop her at the barn. She counts now, third row from the corner of the house, and begins to run. Here, on this side of the hill, the wind has a way of calming after dusk, and without a stiff breeze to stir it up, the smell of lavender has a way of lying down for the night. But as Annie runs through the bushes, she stirs up a breeze of her own. Her thin cotton nightgown flutters behind and brushes against the stalks. The smell of lavender lifts in her wake. The sweet scent chases her up the hill, making her run faster, breathe harder. She runs until she breaks free of the lavender row, and continues on though her lungs burn and her sides ache until she reaches Grandpa's barn.

Living here on this farm all her married years and letting Grandpa grow tobacco was Grandma's greatest failing. The way those tobacco plants sprung up tall and proud and then withered and were finally hacked off at the base and hung upside

down to dry was a sign bigger than any other that had ever blessed Grandma, and she had ignored it, overlooked it, or had been plain afraid of it. Grandpa was damned to wilt and wither and end up no more than a husk of the man he once was. He was damned to suck on that tobacco for fifty of his sixty years, to chop it and dry it and haul it and sell it. He was damned to die, and when finally he did, shriveled up and beginning to rot before he was laid in the ground, Grandma sold the land, sold nearly every acre that had ever grown a stalk of tobacco.

By the time Daddy, Mama, Annie, and Caroline moved in, Grandma had staked out the lavender beds. They had to move in, had no choice. When Grandma sold the land, she sold Daddy's livelihood. That's what Mama said to Grandma the day the bags were unpacked. How do you sell a man's birthright and expect him to survive? Grandma said she had plenty of money and no one would ever need for a thing. And isn't lavender a nicer crop to tend? People who grow lavender don't wilt and wither.

The path beyond the barn is black. Annie pulls the candle and a single matchstick from her pocket. She wraps the match up in her fist, hooks her thumbnail over the red tip, turns her face away, and plucks. The flame pops up, singeing the tip of her thumb. She touches the fire to the waxy wick, shakes out the match, and sticks her thumb in her mouth. She sucks on the sore patch and then cups the pocket watch that hangs from a chain around her neck. Its smooth silver case is warm from lying against her skin. She draws the candle close to the watch's face but still has to squint. Fifteen minutes until midnight.

Annie breathes in through her nose and exhales through her mouth, trying to slow the rise and fall of her chest. Even though it hasn't been used for drying tobacco in years, most days the barn still smells like the heavy leaves Daddy and Grandpa once

strung up from its rafters, and like the tips of Daddy's fingers before the land was sold, and the chambray work shirts he wore in those days, and his tan trousers even after they'd been washed and wrung and hung on the line. He was happier then, when he spent all his time with tobacco.

During the day, a person has a good view of the Baine place from the barn. But now, under a black sky, there is nothing but darkness beyond the faint light of the candle. When Annie looks back down the hill, her own house is dark too, except for the dim yellow glow coming from the kitchen. Grandma leaves on the light over the stove in case someone needs a sip of water during the night. Mrs. Baine must not have a light like that, or if she does, she has no reason to keep it burning all night long. Annie holds the candle at arm's length and shields the flame with her free hand. She's never actually been to the well, has only seen it from the Hollerans' side of the waist-high fence made of limestone, one flat rock stacked on top of another.

Remembering Daddy, Annie looks back toward the house below with the one dimly lit window. She's too old to be wishing her daddy would come for her and take care of her, but that's exactly what she's wishing. She was sure before that Daddy was out here watching over her, probably him and Abraham Pace together, but if they were somewhere nearby, they'd have come for her by now. They'd have seen her standing outside the barn, squinting to see some landmark that would direct her a few feet to the right, a few feet to the left. It must be the whiskey. Too much of it and a bomb couldn't wake Daddy. That's what Mama says over coffee the mornings after Daddy and Abraham Pace have a go at their whiskey.

And then Annie thinks of Ryce Fulkerson and holds her breath so she can hear. She's listening for footsteps because maybe she

heard something. Maybe that was a twig snapping or a clump of dirt getting kicked aside. Maybe Ryce is here even though she crushed that dead frog of his. It was a spiteful thing to do. Even as she did it, even as she crushed that chalky white body, she knew it was such, and as sorry as she was, she couldn't stop herself. Mean-spirited and spiteful and now she's alone because of it. She stretches the candle overhead, leans around the barn, and wishes she hadn't been so nasty.

“Ryce,” she whispers, but only once because the sound of her own voice gives her a shiver. She reaches her arm out into the darkness, tips the candle, and can't help crying out when a stream of hot wax runs down the back of her hand. She drops the candle. The flame goes out.

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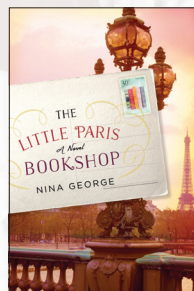
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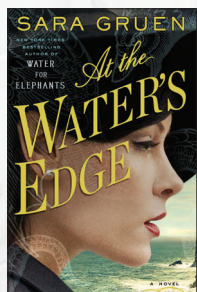
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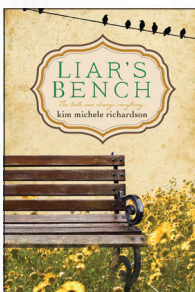
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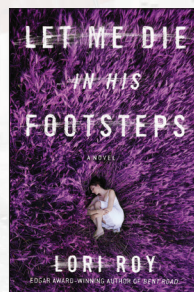
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