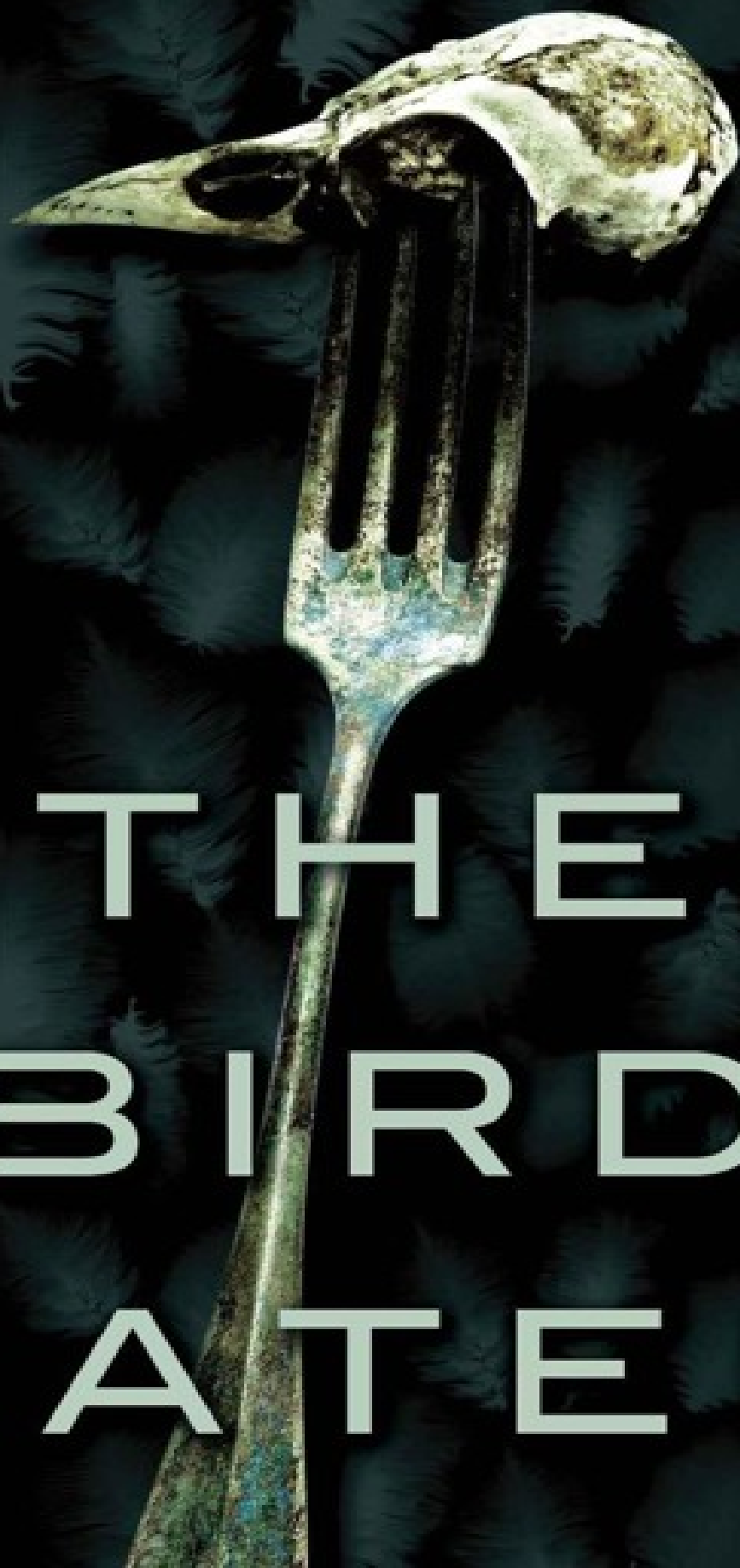


ANIA AHLBORN



THE
BIRD
EATER

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THE BIRD EATER

ANIA AHLBORN

47NORTH

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“Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortals ever dared to dream before...”

—Edgar Allan Poe, *The Raven*

One

Plunging her hands into a wad of pizza dough, Edie Holbrook came to realize that she'd forgotten to turn on the radio two seconds too late. She shot a look over her shoulder, eyeing Fletcher's old Sony boom box on the kitchen windowsill. It was a relic—the kind that played tapes and sometimes ate them for breakfast—but she didn't have the heart to get rid of it. Aaron had his Discman, and Edie would have had the crackle and pop of AM/FM if she'd only remembered to flip the damn thing on. "Your mind is going," she murmured, not caring to consider just how many times she'd told herself that very thing in the past few months. She didn't like thinking about it; hell, she was only thirty-two years old—way too young for crazy. Never mind the fact that her baby sister had only been fifteen.

Never mind that, Edie. Never mind.

She frowned against the hollow stillness of the house, pushed the memory of Miranda back to the dusty fringes of her mind, and focused on the positive: it was Friday, and Friday meant pizza and movies with her favorite kid. Although at fourteen years old, it wouldn't be long before Aaron ducked out of movie night altogether. Edie furrowed her eyebrows at that, wondering what she'd do with herself once her nephew started spending nights out at Stonehenge with friends, drinking cheap beer, jumping over bonfires, and howling at the moon the way Fletcher used to when they had first met.

I'll become an old maid, she thought. One without a single cat.

When Fletcher had been young and vivacious and *alive*, he'd tell Edie stories about old Aunt Myrtle who lived in a farmhouse out in the-middle-of-nowhere Missouri. He'd grin his toothy grin, give her an easy shrug, and casually explain that Aunt Myrtle had so many cats that, when she tripped over a particularly fat tabby and broke her hip, the cats eschewed calling the police and ate her alive instead. *It was a terrible tragedy*, he'd say. *We all knew her lifestyle was dangerous, but this?* Fletcher would woefully spread his hands out in front of him and try not to laugh; and despite the fact that Aunt Myrtle had been spun out of the floss of Fletcher's weird imagination, Myrtle became the butt of every wait-till-Edie-gets-old joke.

Edie cracked a grin at the memory, shaking her head with a chuckle as she pressed dough against the floured surface of the kitchen table. Even on her worst days, Fletcher always knew how to make her laugh. Tight finances and taking Aaron in so young had kept them from having a child of their own—a regret Edie was sure she'd never release. Aaron had been sixteen months old when Edie had found Miranda dead in the upstairs bathtub, her wrists slashed, her eyes wide open and staring as though there had been something particularly gruesome perched atop their mother's old chair in the corner of the room. That sunny afternoon had changed nineteen-year-old Edie Bell forever. Without Fletcher, she would have been damned to loneliness and crippling depression; with him, she had somehow managed to continue on living, actually *laughing* at his antics as he clowned around, the great entertainer of tiny Ironwood, Arkansas. He made her so happy, she quietly mourned there not being two of him—a mini-Fletcher with his same sense of humor to counter Aaron's silent, sometimes stoic nature.

Edie had lied to Aaron, had told him that his mother had run off to Hollywood in search of fame and fortune and, perhaps, would someday return to her life in Arkansas with riches beyond any of their wildest dreams; but something about Aaron's silence assured Edie that somehow, by some sort of dark magic, he knew that she had abandoned him. No matter how much Edie doted on him, she never asked him to call her Momma. The idea had always scared her, as though taking Miranda's place would awaken a ghost.

Not liking the silence, Edie hummed "Mary Jane's Last Dance" beneath her breath, rolling dough against the heels of her palms. It was her favorite song, one the radio DJs played on a loop between Bruce Springsteen and Phil Collins tracks. She swayed her hips. There was a whole stack of Heartbreakers tapes somewhere in the living room—Tom Petty's complete collection, courtesy of Fletcher Holbrook's minor obsession since '76. There was a thud in the living room—a bang, bang, *bang* as though someone was stomping mud from their boots.

Edie went silent.

Her gaze jumped from her wedding ring—removed and lying on the table, just shy of the floured surface—to the mouth of the hallway, her

arms breaking out in gooseflesh so suddenly it nearly hurt, every pore expanding and contracting with the hammering of her heart.

Your mind is going.

But the noise had been undeniably loud. She'd heard the stack of teacups and saucers on the table rattle with the vibration of that triple-thump, and she'd heard that banging before.

Probably a neighbor tooling around in the woods, cutting down dead trees, getting a jump start on firewood.

It was a possibility, but what about all the things that had been plaguing her for the past few months? The creak of the stairs when no one was there to use them; doors she'd left open closing on their own, and doors she was damn sure she'd closed yawning open when her back was turned. Why had she spent the last week washing her hair with her eyes open, securing the doors and triple-checking the locks like someone fraught with an obsessive compulsion, and sleeping with the lamp on even though she'd never in her life been afraid of the dark? It was either a ghost, or Edie was slowly losing her mind; and since ghosts didn't exist...

They don't exist. If you believed in that stuff you would have never stayed in this house.

It was true. The very first thing she'd heard at school when the Bells had moved into the house at the end of Old Mill Road was that it was haunted, stalked by the ghost of a kid who had done some terrible, wicked thing. Edie never stuck around to hear what that thing had been. She had never been interested because she wasn't a fool. But now her fool's heart was leaping into her throat as the stairs groaned beneath an invisible weight. She could see the front door through the hallway. She *knew* nobody had come inside. And yet those stairs whined as something climbed them, much like the panic that was climbing up her throat, slithering into her mouth, trying to form a scream.

Edie pulled her hands from the wad of dough, the concoction sticking to her fingers, refusing to break its hold. Grabbing a dishtowel from next to the sink, she wiped off her hands, smearing beige-colored paste across a gingham pattern. She didn't dare run the water, afraid of alerting whatever was inside the house to her position.

Like that would make a difference, she thought. As though you could sneak up on a phantom, catch it by surprise.

Ever so slowly, Edie crossed the length of the kitchen to the hall. She paused there as she held her breath, trying to suppress the whimper that was desperate to escape her throat. She tipped her chin up to the ceiling as the second floor creaked overhead. When a door slammed above—so hard it seemed to shake the entire house from the inside out—Edie exhaled a cry of surprise and turned tail. She hurried to the kitchen door, fumbled with the lock, and spilled out through the porch and onto the back lawn.

Still clutching the dirty dishtowel, she could hardly catch her breath against the furious beating of her heart. Her peripheral vision went dark. She squatted on the grass and squeezed her eyes shut, fighting motes of brilliant white light that danced across the backs of her eyelids, refusing to surrender to the spin of vertigo. Edie didn't stay crouched on the grass long. She shot the house a look, half-expecting to see a shadow staring down at her from her bedroom window, but the window was empty.

Because no one is in the house, dummy.

But if no one was in the house, where had the noise come from? She could have imagined a bang or two, but the creak of the stairs? The whine of floorboards above her head?

It's an old house, she reasoned. It's settling onto its bones.

It was the excuse she had grown up hearing—scary creaks and snaps and whines were nothing but walls shrinking or expanding in the night; suspicious scratching sounds were made by wind pushing branches against the clapboards; doors that swung open after they were closed were off-balance and needed adjusting. Ma and Daddy Bell were the least superstitious pair of folks Edie had ever known, which was why they had decided to move into that house despite all the stories in the first place—because ghosts were fairy tales made up by people who were too empty-headed to think about things that made sense. And then Miri lost her sense and became as empty-headed as the rest of those featherbrained believers.

An imaginary friend wouldn't have been anything to bat an eyelash at if Miri had been three instead of thirteen; her age had betrayed her imagination, and before Edie knew it, her little sister was hopped up on antipsychotics and sleeping sixteen hours a day. Sure, the stairs creaked and the floors whined and sometimes doors Edie had closed would suddenly be open, but that certainly didn't mean ghosts were to blame. But if Edie had asked Miranda, Miri would have smiled her strange,

faraway smile and said that “the boy” had done it, the one she called Birdie because of the way he hooked his thumbs together and fluttered his hands.

She was insane, Edie reminded herself. *Miri was sick. She lost her mind.*

Except that now Edie felt like *she* was losing her mind too—a thirty-two-year-old widow standing out on the back lawn, staring up at the house like some gaping idiot when, in less than an hour, Aaron would be home from school, begging his aunt to hurry up in the kitchen; they had to get to the video rental place before all the good movies were gone.

You’re being ridiculous.

She squared her shoulders and marched up the back porch steps. Hesitating with her hand on the door, she cleared her throat as if to announce herself to the empty kitchen and stepped inside. “If there’s anyone here, you’d better get out of here before I lose my patience,” she told the house. “And if that’s you, Fletcher, you stop this right now. You’re scaring the bejeezus out of me and it isn’t the least bit funny.” Standing in front of the kitchen table, she listened for a reply—the creak of hinges as a door swung open, another whine of the floorboards.

Edie all but screamed when something hitting a window sounded from the top of the stairs.

This time she didn’t falter. Despite her runaway heart, she bolted into the hallway and stomped up the stairs, imagining Aaron singsonging after her: *I ain’t ’fraid of no ghost!* Reaching the top riser, she pivoted on the balls of her bare feet and marched into her nephew’s bedroom, and there, against the glass, was a dusty imprint of a phantom bird; its wings outstretched, each feather delicately outlined in powder down.

“Oh, you idiot,” she said, not sure whether the insult was directed toward herself and her racing pulse or the stupid creature who hadn’t yet mastered his God-given gift of flight. But it didn’t matter now. She shot a look at Aaron’s *Ghostbusters* poster and laughed. It would certainly be a good story to tell tonight—hapless Edie Holbrook, terrified by creaky houses and birds who had flunked out of flight school. Rolling her eyes at herself, she plucked Aaron’s crumpled PJs from the foot of the bed and tossed them into the dirty laundry hamper in the corner, and as she instinctually began to tidy his room, her heart sputtered to a stop.

It was a dragging sound, like a soldier who'd just had his legs blown off in battle commando-crawling across the downstairs floor.

But the groan that accompanied the drag was far from heroic. It sounded like a woman—far away yet somehow inside the house just the same. It sounded like a woman who couldn't find enough breath to scream.

The world spun counterclockwise, and Edie caught herself with a hand against Aaron's wall. A Bon Jovi poster crinkled beneath her fingers, the top right corner ripping free of the pushpin that kept it tacked to the wall. Its glossy surface stuck to the sweaty palm of her hand. The whimpering moan from downstairs continued. She knew it was impossible, but she also couldn't get it out of her head: it sounded like Miranda—the way she would cry when Daddy screamed at her for the last few years of her life. *Get a grip, girl!* he'd yell, then impatiently shove his lunatic daughter into a corner, somehow convinced that anger and hard hands would scare the insanity right out of Miri's skull.

The familiarity of that whimpering cry was what pushed Edie out of Aaron's room and onto the top landing of the stairs. She gripped the banister with both hands as she struggled to see through a sheen of tears; half-expecting to see her little sister crumpled at the foot of the first riser, her shoulders shaking with suppressed sobs, her face pink and swollen from hours of crying about things neither Edie nor her parents could comprehend.

"Miri?" she whispered, her throat dry, her arms quaking despite her white-knuckled grip on the upper railing.

She imagined that letting go of the banister would send her hands flying about her face like spastic birds with broken wings, like how ghost boy Birdie would send his hands dancing about him, preparing for some magic trick that Edie's sister never revealed. But at the back of her mind, Edie knew the muffled wail from down below didn't belong to Miranda. If Miranda had a ghost, Edie was convinced it would be forever trapped in the upstairs bathroom just shy of her left shoulder—a bathroom that Fletcher had gutted, tub and all, and renovated from floor to ceiling.

That bathroom had been a running joke between them until the day Fletcher died; they called it "the lounge" because it was the fanciest room in all of Holbrook House. Not a speck of the past—of what Miranda had

done to herself—had been left behind, but the memory had remained. Edie hardly ever used the bathroom that was fit for a queen; she was always conveniently downstairs or near the master bath whenever she was hit with the urge to use the toilet. She only ventured into “the lounge” when it needed cleaning, and even then, she’d clean the mirror and scrub the faucets with her eyes half-closed.

But if Miranda was trapped inside that bathroom, who was moaning down below; who was dragging themselves across the floor like the wounded; who was inside the house?

Edie veered away from the stairs, overcome by a staggering sense of not knowing what to do—freeze, run, hold her breath, pray to God? Her gaze tripped over Aaron’s open bedroom door, his posters calling out to her, his unmade bed promising a sense of comfort and protection the rest of the house couldn’t possibly provide. His door was less than ten feet away, but the upstairs breezeway seemed to unspool in front of her like an impossibly long corridor. She lurched forward, desperate to reach the only room she was somehow sure would offer safety. Edie caught hold of the doorframe to pull herself inside, fighting a strange atmospheric change. It felt as though the air in the house had been sucked out and replaced by something thick and viscous, something impossible to breathe. She was on the verge of weeping—hardly able to catch a breath, panic twisting her stomach into a constrictor knot.

And then, as if by magic, the moaning from the base of the stairs went silent.

Edie froze where she stood, a foot shy of stepping into Aaron’s room.

She turned her head to look over the railing, saw nothing.

When she looked back to Aaron’s room, her breath left her entirely.

Standing before her was a boy who looked about Aaron’s age, dark hair nothing short of a bird’s nest, his skin waxy pale, and eyes twin-moon round. But none of those features compared to his wicked smile, so maniacally wrong it seemed to inch up toward his ears. Crimson blood smeared across his gums and slithered into the gutters between his teeth.

Before Edie could react—a scream or a stumbling backward step—the boy grabbed hold of Aaron’s bedroom door—over a hundred years old and made of solid wood—and slammed it in her face.

For a split second Edie didn't realize what had just happened; she didn't feel the pain. She was too stunned by the strange boy to feel a thing, shocked into numbness by the gruesome grin that had pulled up at the corners into a clown's-mask leer.

A moment later, her right hand ignited with pain that felt as though invisible fire was licking at her skin. She reflexively tore her hand away from the doorframe, blood instantly dropping onto her bare feet in warm, fat splotches. She didn't have enough air to cry out. She simply gasped dryly like a fish suffocating upon the shore. Panic and pain made it impossible to assess the damage, but it didn't take a doctor to know her fingers were broken. They jutted away from her second knuckle in weird, awkward angles, and if she hadn't steadied herself against the wall, she would have fallen flat on her face the moment she caught a glimpse of bone sticking up through tendons and flesh. But she managed to stay on her feet, staggering toward the staircase, the voice inside her head screaming, *Get out of the house, Edie, get out of the house!* Not because of the gnarled root that was now her right hand, but because of the boy with the hellish grin—the boy who shouldn't have been there but suddenly was.

She made it down only two risers before the quiet was suddenly cut by the flapping of what sounded like hundreds of wings.

Edie screamed and drew her hands up to protect her face from the dark-winged, madly chirping tornado cycloning up the stairwell.

She screamed against the onslaught of beaks jabbing at her arms, her breasts, her legs, the back of her head.

Her foot slipped as she tried to fight them off, blood flying from her wounded hand. She tipped forward. Her legs folded beneath her like the necks of origami cranes. Her shoulder hit the wall before her temple hit the handrail, and her hip cracked against the edge of a stair before she hit the hardwood floor with a hollow thud, splayed out on her stomach.

The house went silent for a second time, the birds vanishing as if they had all flown out an open window single-file—vanishing as though they had never been there at all, much like the boy in Aaron's room had appeared out of nowhere.

Magic. The word tumbled through her head despite the throbbing of her hand, despite the fear that had tied itself tight around her neck. *The*

dark kind of magic both Ma and Daddy were scared off by; the kind of magic they never believed in until they couldn't believe in anything else.

She slowly turned her head to the left and looked to the front door—her escape route, so close yet so unnervingly improbable. Edie tried to lift herself up, that voice still urging her to *Get out* before the house revealed more of its dark secrets, before the boy from upstairs appeared again and did God only knew what—but a hot nail of pain stabbed between her shoulder blades, crippling her effort. She cried out and pressed her cheek to the cool floor, waited just long enough to catch her breath and then tried again, but her legs refused to move. She forced herself to concentrate, attempted to feel past the sharp heat of her broken hand to the soles of her feet, tried to figure out whether she couldn't feel her legs because the pain of her fingers was blotting out all her senses, or whether her legs were numb because she'd broken her back.

Unable to help herself, she burst into tears, weeping as she thought of Aaron riding the school bus toward home. She could tell him that she'd slammed her hand in the door and lost her footing in her rush to call 911 from the downstairs phone, but how would she ever explain that she didn't want to come back here? How could she ever tell him he couldn't go up to his room because there was something in the walls—some evil that may have been there all along; because his room had been his mother's room, because she *hadn't* run off to be an actress but had slashed her wrists and bled to death in the bathroom Aaron used every day?

A helpless whimper slithered from her lips. *Selfish*, she thought. *We should have listened, shouldn't have thumbed our noses at things we didn't understand. We should have never stayed here after Miri did what she did. What were we thinking? What the hell were we...*

A shadow shifted in the corner of the front room, just beyond the window next to the front door. Edie saw it from the corner of her eye and instinctively jerked in response, trying to scramble to her feet despite being laid out the way she was. She couldn't make it out at first, but that didn't matter. Miranda howled from beyond the grave. *Get out, E, get out!* Edie knew that whatever was stepping out of the darkness was the very thing that had unmoored her little sister; she knew it had that power; she had to get away.

Edie began to slink across the floor as best she could, a cry slithering from her throat. Every pull of her arms was agony; every drag across the floorboards made her right hand throb like a beating heart. The whole thing felt like *déjà vu*, like she had lived it before in another life despite never having broken a bone, never having fallen down the stairs, never having crawled across a floor like a

a soldier...a wounded soldier with his legs blown off.

"I don't understand," she whispered between sobs. "I don't understand this, I don't understand."

The whimper, the drag—she had heard these things before they had happened, had heard them before *she* was the one who was crying, crawling across the hardwood like a murder victim not yet quite dead.

A silhouette was making its approach; it was ill-defined, as though the fall had knocked her eyesight sideways, but she could make it out more clearly as it came closer—a man?

Too small, she screamed inside her head. *It's too small.*

The boy she had seen upstairs seemed to glide toward her, his expression still frozen in that maniacal smile. He crouched not a foot from where she lay, cocked his head to the side with a malicious sort of curiosity, and though his features sputtered like bad reception, she could tell he was *admiring* her, as if her misfortune were his delight.

He reached out, brushed the hair from her face so delicately.

Don't touch me!

She wanted to scream, but the sight of him so close rendered her mute. She knew who he was, didn't have a single doubt in her reeling, shrieking mind.

Birdie.

The boy who Miranda had met in the trees just beyond the house.

The boy who didn't exist.

The one who had driven her sister mad.

Birdie leaned in close and Edie moaned, twisting away from his blood-smeared mouth, his wicked teeth glinting in the sun. She pulled in a breath to yell, but when he caught her by the ears she realized that she wasn't afraid for herself—at least not anymore. She was scared for Aaron. He'd come plodding up the front steps of the house in less than an hour now, excited by the idea of staying up late and stuffing himself full of

pizza and chicken fingers. She was scared for the boy who would push open the front door and find her dead at the base of the stairs, her hand mangled, the pizza dough drying out on the kitchen table, abandoned like he had been when he was still too young to remember. She was scared for how he'd feel when his ears would ring in the deafening quiet, terrified of what it would do to him, of what would come of her sweet, darling boy whom she loved as her own but never once called *son*.

But mostly, she was afraid that Aaron would come back and Birdie would be waiting, grinning his bloody-toothed smile.

A smile that, up until that very moment, she was sure had been nothing but a figment of her little sister's imagination. A delusion of a broken mind.

Birdie's hands circled Edie's head, the stillness of summer muffling beneath his palms, and as Edie waited for death, her only regret was not believing Miranda, just like their parents hadn't. She wished she could go thirteen years into the past, take Miri's hand and, kneeling beside her bed, whisper that she—Miranda's big sis Edith—believed her when Miranda screamed the baby was his. *His*. Impossibly his.

Because if ghosts could exist, if they *did* exist, impossibility was rendered moot.

Now, with Birdie's hands clamped against her ears, Edie Holbrook knew ghosts were real. She knew Miranda hadn't been insane.

Edie's neck snapped like dry wood.

And whether it was a voice in her head or Birdie whispering a final farewell, terror was the last emotion Edie felt, because like his mother, Aaron wouldn't get away, *he'll never get away, he won't get away*.

Two

US-77 turned into southbound I-79 and the flat fields of Nebraska gave way to rolling hills. Aaron Holbrook's Tercel crawled down the west side of Missouri's border, and the closer he got to Ironwood, the more he ached to see the house he grew up in again. It had been twenty-one years since he'd found his aunt sprawled across the hardwood floor at the foot of the stairs, his memories of Arkansas fuzzy with a strange mix of heartache and nostalgia, but he was sure the serpentine streets that snaked through the trees were just as they had always been—a relentless maze of cracked concrete twisting through hickories and oaks, miles of tangled branches separating one house from the next.

He followed the highlighted route on his phone into the heart of the Ozarks, knowing that when it came to direction, his memory would undoubtedly fail. But despite his blurry recollection, the place was just as he remembered it, unchanged despite countless seasons that had passed. He recognized a broken-down refrigerator in one of the yards—an old GE that locked with a chrome handle and weighed half a ton. It sat in front of a dilapidated mobile home—the very same spot it had occupied when, as a third-grader, Aaron's best buddy, Eric Banner, retold a story he'd heard from his older brother: a kid had gotten himself locked inside that fridge. A week later, his parents or uncle or maybe just some stranger off the street found him inside the icebox, dead as a doornail and half-baked by the summer heat, his face twisted into a mask of horror. Aaron and Eric would wander down Old Mill Road just to get a look at that relic of an appliance, daring each other to open it and see what was inside. Years later, on a particularly hot afternoon, Aaron gathered up the nerve to get closer than ever, but he stopped short of pulling open the door. Eric squealed that he heard something scratching from inside—like a dead kid trying to get out—and they both took off running down the road, screaming squeaky yelps of terror until they ran out of breath.

Something about going back to the place he'd been torn away from set his teeth on edge. The idea of seeing the house that, in one way or another, had killed Edie and Fletcher made him want to turn that Toyota around and forfeit the two thousand miles he had come. But Aaron had his fingers crossed; he'd give the house a chance to redeem itself. Perhaps, in

apology for destroying his childhood, it would patch together Aaron's freshly broken life.

He reached the end of the road, a diamond-shaped sign assuring him that Old Mill still was, and would forever be, a dead-end street. He took a slow left turn onto a gravel driveway, and that was when he saw it: the house sitting far back on the property, its white clapboards faded and peeling, a hipped gray-shingled roof looking worse for wear. It was nothing but a two-story box with four windows in the front, a redbrick chimney jutting out from the center of the roof just beyond a single dormer window.

Aaron slowly rolled the Tercel up the dirt driveway, the small U-Haul trailer clanging as it straggled behind the car. He parked beside three oaks that towered over the property, their branches precariously hanging above the roofline, pulled the e-brake, killed the engine, and stared at the place through a windshield smeared with insect guts and road grit.

"Holy shit," he whispered, his chin pressed against the top of the steering wheel. He hadn't known what to expect, but certainly not this. The place was a wreck—a husk of the bright and cheerful house of his youth. The once carefully preened lawn was long overgrown, still green in places, but otherwise given way to the dirt and waist-high weeds. Edie's hydrangeas were nothing more than skeletal tangles, dry branches reaching across the front porch steps as if to keep trespassers at bay—the same porch steps he'd run up that Friday afternoon after school, yelling Aunt Edie's name to alert her that he was home before ever pushing open the front door. Seeing her. Standing frozen in the doorway, his schoolbooks slipping from his hands, his entire world disintegrating as his pre-algebra homework and Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* crashed to the hardwood at his feet.

The bug netting that had stretched from porch post to porch post was gone save for one of the corners, where it hung torn and sagging, shivering in the early evening breeze.

Reaching across the center console to the passenger seat, Aaron's fingers looped through the handle of a small camcorder—a device he'd purchased on his therapist's suggestion—and slowly slid out of the vehicle. He kept the Toyota between himself and the house as he studied it, not wanting to get too close just yet. He could hardly believe how

completely it had gone to hell. Once upon a time, Edie had prided herself in having the prettiest house in all of Boone County. It hadn't been much of a title, but it kept her buzzing around the property in all seasons, making it as special as she could. Flowers in the spring and summer, handmade wreaths of pinecones and fall foliage in the autumn, strings of Christmas lights jumping from tree to tree in the winter. But what had once been a cheerful house now sagged on its eaves. The only thing missing was the opening strain of the *Addams Family* theme song.

Taking a steadying breath, Aaron pressed the RECORD button on the camcorder. The recorder was supposed to serve as a coping device—a way, his therapist had said, *to remind yourself that you're still alive, that there are still things left to be done*. Aaron wasn't sure whether he bought into the theory that watching himself *outside* of himself was going to help him come to terms with the wreck his life had become, but he was willing to try anything, including coming back home. *Ironwood is the original source of your trauma*, the doc had assured him. *Old ghosts are just as important as new ones*. Whether Aaron would watch his life play itself back at him later, he didn't know; all he knew was that right then, right there, that camera was putting a layer between him and reality. He had thought the camcorder suggestion stupid at first, but now he was glad he had it.

Stepping out from behind the car, Aaron slowly moved across what had once been the front lawn, flowering weeds brushing his bare calves as he walked, various tattoos peeking out from beneath the hem of his board shorts. The most distinct design was a pair of eagle's wings that circled his throat like choking hands. Ink had become a compulsion, as though the colors that were needled into his skin had been infused with slivers of hope. He had gotten his first one—a raven on his right shoulder blade—with a fake ID he and Cooper had picked up when they were seventeen. Cooper used his to buy cigarettes, but all Aaron wanted was the sting of the needle. It felt like bloodletting, draining the bereavement from his veins. His latest addition had been a small one to the leafless branches that spiraled down his left arm from shoulder to wrist: a single owl etched into the underside of his forearm, its golden feathers the only color in an otherwise monochromatic piece of art. Perhaps he'd round off twenty-

three to an even two dozen during his time back home. Or maybe he'd avoid it altogether, choosing to forget this place once and for all.

Uncle Fletcher had hung a tire from the high-up branches of one of the three oaks that flanked the driveway long before Aaron ever started school. That tire swing had been gone years before Edie had passed, but the rope that had held it in place still dangled from a bough, eerie in the way it swung back and forth like a neckless noose. Tipping the camera skyward, Aaron blinked at what looked to be dozens of birds' nests tucked into the crooks of ancient branches, but there were no birds. Ironical, seeing as how those starlings had been why Fletcher had climbed up that rickety ladder in the first place.

But Aaron didn't want to think about things like that. Those *what ifs* led him down a dark road. *What if Fletcher had been alive when Edie had fallen down the stairs? What if he could have saved her? What if I had only checked the seat belt? What if we had just stopped off for doughnuts like Ryder had wanted? Just a five-minute difference, a five-second difference to that stoplight...*

He clenched his teeth against those thoughts and forced himself back into the present, stopping at the first porch step and pulling at the branch of a dead hydrangea bush until it snapped. Edie's once beautiful flowering bushes were nothing but a fire hazard now, waiting for the spark that would wipe the entire house off the map—something that would have overjoyed his friend Cooper had it actually happened. *Raze it*, he had said. *Don't go back there. You'll find nothing but demons.* Aaron considered climbing up the stairs, unlocking the front door, and stepping inside, but he found himself twisting away from the door. He wasn't ready yet. He didn't want to see the devastation he was sure awaited him inside.

The side of the house was just as bad as the front. Bushes that had once been beautiful now stood skeletal, like haunted house decorations. Aaron pushed through a thicket of flowering rosemary growing wild along the back porch; he held the recorder aloft in his right hand as he moved to Uncle Fletcher's woodshed a hundred yards away. He had helped his uncle paint that shed every other fall, Fletcher on the ladder close to the roofline, Aaron working on the bits he could reach.

Aaron caught the lock that hung on the outside of the shed's door, squeezing it in the palm of his hand, closing his eyes as his eight-year-old

self bolted around the shed's corner and discovered Uncle Fletcher sprawled out upon the soggy earth, lying on his side in the mud. A single bird nest lay on the ground beside him, that old ladder sitting sideways in the mire of dirt and melted snow. Eight-year-old Aaron stood there for what could have been an entire winter, staring forward as snowflakes began to twirl down from the sky. He told himself that he was supposed to scream, that he was supposed to cry, that he was supposed to fall into a hysterical panic, but none of that happened. He simply stared at his fallen uncle in absolute silence and reminded himself to breathe.

Aaron remembered Aunt Edie turning away from the stove when he stepped inside, her smile immediately fading when she spotted the mud he'd tracked across her freshly mopped floor. She shooed him onto the back porch, smacking his shoulders with a dishtowel as the boy ambled back outside. It was only when Edie plopped him down on one of the porch chairs and pulled off his galoshes that she knew something was wrong. In his silence, Aaron began to cry, not because of what he'd seen, but because this would be the end of the Aunt Edie he knew.

"Aaron?" Edie's face registered alarm. "Honey, what's wrong?"

With one rubber boot off and one on, he threw himself into her arms and wept.

Five years later, he found Edie at the base of the stairs. Standing in the front doorway, Aaron had twisted away from the house and broken into a run, bolting down Old Mill as fast as his legs would take him—running for help, or perhaps just running away. When Fletcher had died, Edie had been the one who had changed forever. When Edie had died, Aaron lost a piece of himself, and there hadn't been anyone there to hold him and tell him life would go on, that it would be okay.

Aaron exhaled a sigh and let the shed lock slip from his hand. He swung the camcorder back toward the house—Holbrook House, as Edie had loved to call it—and stared at the peeling paint that was coming off in flakes, just like the flakes that had spiraled from the sky the day Uncle Fletcher had died. Suddenly, he wasn't sure this idea was as fantastic as his therapist had made it seem; hell, how many times had Cooper insisted this whole thing was crazy? *Arkansas*, his best friend had laughed his standard incredulous laugh. *You've got to be fucking kidding. What kind of*

a shrink sends his patient to a place like that anyway? He's a quack, man—a bona fide bullshit artist with one of those mail-order degrees.

But Aaron couldn't just drive back to Portland. Forcing himself to take a forward step, he tried to swallow his anxiety, convincing himself that regardless of whether or not Doc Jandreau knew what he was talking about, Aaron had already told Evangeline he was coming out here; that he was going to “work on himself” so that she'd at least consider letting him back into her life. He needed her. He couldn't turn away from this goddamn house because he was afraid.

This isn't fear, he assured himself. Fear is living the rest of my life without her.

Fear was dragging himself from one day to the next beneath the weight of intolerable guilt, with the knowledge that she blamed him and maybe she was right; maybe it was his fault.

His fingers tightened around the keys in his pocket, ones that had been FedEx'd to him by a local Realtor less than a month before. He climbed the steps of his childhood home, hesitated, and forced the key into the lock.

The moment that front door swung inward, Aaron's gaze stopped dead at the foot of the stairs. For a second Edie was there, crumpled beside the bottom riser, an arm stretched out in front of her as she reached for the door with fingers so mangled that, at first, Aaron was sure she'd stuck them into the grinder she used to turn steak into hamburger meat. With her head turned to the side, her eyes bulged as she stared straight at him, that gaze silently screaming *help me!*

Aaron nearly stumbled backward, jostling the camera as his eyes squeezed shut.

“She's not there,” he whispered, “she's not there, she's not...”

He dared to open his eyes.

Edie Holbrook was gone.

The empty living room sat soundless and vacant before him, cracked plaster decorating the walls, spiderwebs clinging to the corners of windows and doorframes that had once been pristine. Windowsills housed the carcasses of moths and houseflies—creatures that had had been entombed twenty-one years, trying to press their bodies through dirty windows. A pile of bones, feathers, and skin rested in one of the corners,

just beyond the front room window. Aaron winced at the sight of it and looked away, not giving himself a chance to consider how those carcasses had gotten there or why they were piled up like bodies awaiting a mass burial.

Aunt Edie's couch was still draped in an old blanket she had crocheted herself, its crazy kaleidoscope colors having faded beneath a heavy scrim of dust. Those colors were too bright to suppress completely, and Aaron dared to breach the threshold of the house as the blanket drew him inside. Slowly approaching the couch, he allowed his fingers to drift across the delicate loops of yarn he still remembered her knitting while he sat at her feet with a pumpkin between his knees. It had almost been Halloween, and Edie had allowed him to carve the pumpkin himself, warning him that if he got the sloppy pumpkin guts on her precious blanket, he'd be spending the rest of his childhood upstairs in his room.

He ran his hand across the top of the couch, feeling the yarn beneath his palm, only to watch the loops loosen and disintegrate before his eyes. His throat went sickly-tight at the sight of it, Edie's precious blanket coming apart beneath his touch, a grim reminder that what was past was past. No amount of fond memory could bring back the dead.

Aaron forced himself to look away, focusing the camcorder onto the fireplace mantel, still decorated with glass candlesticks and Edie's antique silver-framed mirror, all in their rightful places. The mirror was tarnished by decades of neglect, the mantel covered in dust, downy feathers, and mounds of bird droppings that had oozed and dried down the sides of the white-painted shelf. A faded photograph of Fletcher grinned at him from next to the mirror—Edie's favorite of her late husband, one she had displayed in various parts of the house after he had passed. Aaron recalled a glass-encased pillar candle burning next to at least one of them at all times: a tiny makeshift shrine, complete with an eternal flame. The candle was there, too, sheathed in a thick coating of webbing and dust.

He glanced across the room to the hallway that led into the kitchen. The hall window was broken, shards of glass ground into the hardwood floor by years of trespass. There were footprints in the dust, smudges where curious intruders had run their fingers along walls and picture frames, traces of their fingerprints dotting the dust that papered the walls.

And yet the place hadn't been ransacked. Items remained in perfect, albeit fetid, order.

A flower vase sat in the center of the kitchen table, dead stems jutting skyward in search of sunlight, flower petals surrounding the glass vessel in a circle of decay. The broken kitchen window was covered up with thick plastic sheeting, now tattered and half-pulled away from the frame by wind or curious hands or both, suggesting that if Holbrook House *had* become a trespasser's haven, the police had made a half-assed attempt at securing the property. Aaron didn't remember seeing a broken window on that long-ago Friday afternoon, but even if it had been broken, he wouldn't have noticed. He didn't remember much of anything, only that the mail carrier had picked him up nearly a mile down the road and driven him back home, a fourteen-year-old Aaron too winded and weeping to explain that he didn't want to go back, that he didn't want to spend another second in that house ever again.

Aaron stared at a wooden sign Fletcher had hung above the window, a long slat of stained plywood he'd burned the words *Edie's Bistro* into the summer before he had died. It had been an anniversary gift Edie had girlishly giggled at before pressing a kiss to her husband's cheek in thanks.

It felt strange to stand in that kitchen, surreal that a room that had once bustled with life was now so silent, so utterly inert.

Moving down the hall again, Aaron dared to stop just shy of the staircase that had given him nightmares for years. Part of the railing was still draped in one of Edie's prized blankets. Its rotting fringe hung low, brushing the top of a table lamp surrounded by sun-bleached photos, many of them of Aaron himself—Fletcher and Aaron fishing at Bull Shoals Lake, Aaron openmouthed and laughing while his uncle held a largemouth bass up in victory; Aaron standing in front of the double doors of his elementary school with a Big Bird lunchbox held in front of his knees; Edie and Fletcher embracing in front of a Christmas tree while Aaron's finger encroached into the frame at the top right-hand corner; another of Aaron in front of the same tree, holding up a wooden baseball bat over his head in triumph. Aaron still remembered that bat, taking it out into the backyard despite the winter chill. But it was difficult to focus on fond memories at the foot of those stairs.

He stared at the floor that surrounded the base step, at the very spot his aunt had fallen and broken her neck. They had said she'd taken a tumble, possibly light-headed from the injury she had sustained to her hand. But that was all they had disclosed, because what other details could you divulge to a traumatized fourteen-year-old boy?

He forced his gaze away from those floorboards and climbed the stairs with slow, deliberate steps. The upstairs rooms were the ones he remembered most. His old room was firmly anchored in the early nineties, posters still push-pinned to the walls, so faded they were nothing but pale green and yellow shadows of the images they had once been. The *Ghostbusters* logo stared at him from across the open door—the last remnant of childhood giving way to the likes of *Wayne's World*, *Batman*, and *RoboCop*. Aaron slid his hand up the dusty length of a Bon Jovi poster, its top right-hand corner having flopped down in a paper frown. The paper crackled beneath his touch like a dry autumn leaf. His bed was unmade, covered in black-and-red striped sheets, his pillowcase twenty-one years mused. A pile of CD cases were stacked one on top of the other on his desk: Red Hot Chili Peppers and Faith No More, Guns N' Roses and Ugly Kid Joe—nearly a dozen of the albums Aaron had re-collected over the years, the same albums Ryder had grown fond of because Aaron played them in the car. His heart clenched into a fist as he stared at them, suddenly struck by how similar he and his son had been. A tiny replica, only so much better; seven years upon the earth, gone in a blink.

He turned away, put the room to his back, took a steadying breath, and moved down the upstairs hallway to his aunt's bedroom door. It was open, displaying a simple bedroom furniture set and a bed carefully made two decades before. Another set of photographs decorated a hearth centered on the side wall. A faded rug covered most of the floor, its dusty blue matching Edie's comforter and drapes, reminding Aaron that it had been her favorite color, one that he'd search for anytime he bought her a gift for her birthday or Christmas or Mother's Day. Without stepping further inside, Aaron used the camcorder to zoom in on details he was reluctant to explore too closely. A small vanity sat across from the bed, bottles of perfume carefully organized along its top. The oval mirror looked strangely discolored, as if the silver beneath the glass was starting to fade with age. The decay gave it a ghoulish appearance, like a haunted house

mirror that magically displayed the dead. The wallpaper in one of the far corners was starting to peel away beneath the warped bulge of water damage—no doubt a roof leak that had spawned mold inside the walls.

Shutting off the recorder, Aaron shook his head and turned away, suddenly exhausted by the idea of fixing this place up. It seemed like an impossible task, the kind of thing only a masochist would take on, but he had little choice in the matter. The house was his, regardless of whether or not the state of Arkansas had failed to alert him of his inheritance for the past seventeen years. *We're sorry, there must have been a glitch in the system.* Aaron had two options: sell the house or move in, and regardless of what he chose to do, fixing up the place was step number one.

He trekked back down the stairs in the paling light, the golden glow of sunset fading into an early evening purple. Stepping onto the front porch, he took a seat on the top stair, pushed his fingers through his hair, and breathed a sigh into the cicada hum that surrounded him. There was a lot of work that needed to be done. The dust needed to be cleared, the windows repaired and washed. The ghosts of his past extricated. He could only hope that once he started clearing the cobwebs here, his soul would be unshackled in kind. At least, that's what Doc Jandreau had led him to believe, and Aaron *had* to believe. It was the only thing he had left.

Three

It was dark when Aaron jerked awake—so incredibly dark that he hardly knew where he was. The house shone in the moonlight like a silver ghost, its windows somehow darker than the rest of the night. Aaron pushed himself up to sit in the reclined driver's seat, winced against the crick in his neck, and grimaced at the way that house seemed to glare at him from behind those three large oaks. He fished his phone out of the cup holder and checked the time: 5:25 a.m. He'd slept through the entire night. The Ativan he usually took for his anxiety had been forgotten in a bag still in the trunk, and the alcohol he drank to soothe his nerves was still packed away in the U-Haul hitched to the back of the car. Drawing his hand down his face, he gave a quiet laugh. The sun wouldn't be up for an hour, but he still considered it his first success.

Plucking the camcorder from the passenger seat, he balanced it on the dashboard, grimaced at the awkwardness of the whole thing despite being alone, and pressed RECORD.

"Day one, Doc," he told the blinking red light. "Still not sure about this whole thing; this place is a tomb." He paused, shot a look through the windshield at the house he grew up in. "I don't like the idea of sleeping in there. Just walking around inside feels, I don't know..." He shook his head, frowning as he searched for the right word. "Inappropriate, I guess, like walking on someone's grave. I doubt I'll be able to handle it—I mean, maybe for the time being, but not to move in like I was considering. That whole idea was probably crazy, like you said. Except you didn't call it crazy—you said it was 'perfunctory' or 'impetuous' or something really highbrow like that." Aaron cracked a grin, but his smile faded as quickly as it came. "Evan might like it out here," he continued, "but living here would be weird, at least without gutting the entire place, and that would cost a fortune. I don't know..." He glanced down to his hands, considering his words. "But at least I didn't need any meds to sleep, and I haven't touched the bottle. A step in the right direction. 'Progress,' as you'd say. And I think my appetite may be coming back, because I'm starving." He leaned into the recorder and gave it a harried look—a look he was sure Doc Jandreau would question despite Aaron's haggard

expression being a joke. “Doc...” He breathed into the lens. “I need pancakes. My mental health hangs in the balance.”

After unhitching the rented cargo trailer from the back of his sedan, Aaron followed the intricate coils of streets into town, and ducked into the Blue Ox, a local diner that looked just as it had when he was a kid. The waitress that served him a steaming mug of bitter coffee smiled at first, but her cheerful demeanor quickly shifted to what Aaron could only assume was distrust. For a moment she looked as though she recognized him—impossible—or wanted to give him the small-town *we don’t take kindly to strangers* speech, but evidently she thought better of it and took his order instead.

A stack of chocolate chip pancakes later, Aaron tinkered with the camcorder, recording Ironwood’s backwoods Americana in quick, jarring snippets: the middle-aged waitress with her graying hair and her outdated Mayberry uniform, a couple of truckers sitting at the lunch counter guzzling black coffee and inhaling rubbery scrambled eggs. Had anyone asked him, Aaron would have sworn he was disturbed by the outdated décor and the small-town vibe; but the truth of it was, Edie had left him with a soft spot for vintage. The diner made him feel like he had been transported sixty years back in time, and that was somehow far more comforting than disconcerting.

Even the kid standing outside the diner window looked antiquated, with his scraggly dark mop of hair and his navy blue coveralls. Aaron raised an eyebrow at the boy in acknowledgment—the kid staring at him with a weirdly distant look on his face—but he didn’t respond. Raising a hand in hello, Aaron waited for the boy to reciprocate, but all the kid did was stare. His deadlocked stance was unnerving. Aaron glanced around the place to see if anyone else had noticed him, but nobody paid any mind. The waitress was refilling grungy white mugs, accidentally splashing coffee onto the counter when her gaze nervously flitted back to Aaron.

It’s the tattoos, he told himself. Probably why the kid is playing zombie outside as well. He wasn’t sure why he was surprised at feeling out of place. Had he spotted his doppelganger wandering around Ironwood when he had lived here, his jaw would have probably hit the floor.

Aaron turned his attention back to the dark-haired boy, recalling the stories Uncle Fletcher used to tell about feral children living among the

cedar and catalpa trees. The kid was still peering at him through the window, nearly glaring. It made Aaron nervous, and so he looked down to the plate in front of him that had yet to be cleared away. A moment later, he jumped despite himself; the kid slapped the palms of his hands hard against the glass. Aaron blinked in surprise as he watched the boy's mouth curl up into a smirk before he turned and ran. Aaron looked back to the waitress and her consortium of long haulers, but the truckers hadn't budged from their slouched positions, and the waitress didn't seem to care about the loud bang that had rattled the window in its frame. She had better things to do than chase delinquents during her morning shift.

Aaron supposed he had better things to worry about as well, like where the hell to start when it came to cleaning up two decades of destruction. He nearly asked the waitress whether that kid made a habit of freaking out her customers when she dropped off his bill, but she fled his table faster than he could talk, returning to the truckers at the breakfast counter. One of the guys slid off a stool and pulled a cap over his hair. He wrapped his arms around the waitress and gave her a kiss on the cheek before shuffling outside with a wave of his hand. Aaron furrowed his eyebrows and paid his bill, then slid out of the booth and ducked into the parking lot. He caught the trucker climbing into the cab of a semi, wondering if Doc Jandreau would consider driving coast to coast therapeutic. Maybe Aaron would forget this whole thing and get a trucker's license, leave his old life in the rearview mirror. But if he did that, the state would go after Evangeline for back taxes rather than him.

The house was his past. His responsibility. After he had Edie's place handled, he could screw all and hit the road.

It was way too early to call water and power to request the house's utilities be reinstated—they wouldn't be open for another few hours, right along with the hardware store and the supermarket, so Aaron decided to take the opportunity to explore his old hometown. Maybe it was the fond memories of being a kid without any worries, but he was drawn to his old elementary school first.

Ironwood Elementary looked just the way he remembered it, save for one glaring detail: The windowless single-story redbrick building—rumored to have been designed by a prison architect—had the *elementary* part of its signage removed, left to simply read IRONWOOD SCHOOL with a

disquieting gap between the words. The parking lot was abandoned, but that was to be expected; it was the dead of summer. Classes wouldn't resume for at least another month. But there were fliers taped to the inside windows of the doors, and the sign out front read S_AY _AFE THIS SU_MER! spelled out in skewed marquee lettering. When Aaron pulled around the back to get a look at the playground, he spotted a football field where there had been nothing but soybeans, two yellow-painted field goals jutting up into the sky. The side of the building was painted in red and white—twelve-foot script reading IRONWOOD WARRIORS blazing bright against the bricks. The monkey bars Aaron remembered had been replaced. Where there had once been a triad of simple raw metal bars of varying heights, there was now a glossy red-and-white swing set attached to a covered spiral slide—the kind that heated up like an oven in the summer, so hot it could flay the skin right off your back. A couple of tetherball poles lined the far end of the playground, the balls removed to prevent theft, dingy white ropes swaying in the breeze. But it didn't make sense that Ironwood would choose to send high school students to the elementary school rather than the other way around. Aaron's curiosity getting the best of him, he doubled back to Ironwood High—a school he'd only attended for a few months before everything had changed.

What he found was a relic of a building so utterly covered in graffiti it easily rivaled the ruins of a dilapidated Detroit. Aaron turned the camera onto the high school's façade, slowly panning across desecration that radiated animosity toward its middle-of-nowhere locale. Beneath what was left of the school's signage, someone had spray painted the word SUCKS! with a giant exclamation point hammering the sentiment home. Another tag read BURN ARKANSAS and a third more eloquently declared: THIS TOWN IS A GHOST.

Aaron swallowed at that assertion, something about it making his stomach go sour. Those scrawled, paint-runny words felt heavier than they should have, as though they were speaking directly to him, translating to: *get out, go home, save yourself, run*. He took the advice and pulled away from the skeleton of a building that had, at one point in his life, been his school. He had only spent a couple of months in those halls when Ironwood became little more than a distant memory, a phantom of what it had once been, a ghost, just like the graffiti said.

The burger joint directly across the street from the defunct Ironwood High was still there, but the place he and the Holbrooks had frequented on Friday nights was now called Bennie's Burgers rather than Fred's. The joint radiated a sad sort of charm, holding out hope for a future that Ironwood couldn't offer, let alone guarantee.

The Superette, which had been one of two grocery stores that served the community, had been converted into some sort of nameless club, its windows blacked out, oddly reminiscent of home. Back in Portland, he had started frequenting strip clubs to dull the pain, convincing himself that there was no better place to buy himself a dose of disease. He was lonely. He hated his life. And yet he still craved human contact. He blamed the Beatles. "All you need is love," and if you couldn't find love, a stripper in need of some extra cash would do in a pinch. Then again, the Beatles also claimed that "happiness is a warm gun." He had taken that advice to heart as well, a never-been-used .45 caliber pistol lying in wait in one of a dozen moving boxes, safely tucked among his things.

The Dairy Queen where Fletcher took Aaron for ice cream was no longer a DQ, but some cheap knockoff. Whoever had bought the place had gutted the sign that had once shone proudly above the walk-up portico, leaving nothing but the iconic soft-serve cone. Dairy Queen's white capital letters had been replaced by a close match to the original. Its new name—Mr. Ice Cream—blazed in the early morning sun.

There were a few buildings he didn't recognize—a wonder that anyone would have the audacity to build in Ironwood at all: a coffee shop that boasted free Wi-Fi, a questionable-looking Chinese buffet, a mechanic's shop that rotated tires for free with every oil change. Despite the businesses that had changed hands and changed names, the center of Ironwood looked just as it had in the early nineties.

The roundabout that caused more than its fair share of accidents was still there, a fifteen-foot-tall lumberjack carved out of pine posing for everyone and no one all at once. The giant held an ax over one shoulder, one boot propped up on a wood-carved steel beam that rested under his enormous boot. That lumberjack was the symbol of what Ironwood had once been—steel and lumber, both industries having left the area decades before. But the lumberjack kept smiling. Even when the local kids doused him in gasoline and set him on fire during Aaron's fifth-grade year, the

lumberjack continued to grin as flames licked up his sides. He was still tarnished and soot-black from feet to chest, and the platform he stood on continued to be surrounded by flowers. Edie had volunteered as the roundabout caretaker for a couple of springs, planting daisies and petunias along the lumberjack's base. Whether people still volunteered for such a thing was a mystery, but someone had taken the time to plant pansies in Ironwood Warrior red and white around the giant's blackened feet, as though doing so would invite good luck into a town that desperately needed it.

Aaron looped around until he reached the hardware store, called water and power to get the house back on the grid while he waited for the store to open, then weaved through the lanes in search of cleaning supplies that could put some sort of dent in the ruin that awaited him back home. He asked the cashier for the number of a local window replacement place, and then ventured to Banner Goods for provisions.

Along with the Blue Ox, Banner's seemed to be the only place in town that was reminiscent of what it had been twenty years before. Bright sales signs for fresh fruit and bread decorated the windows, while a selection of potted plants and flowers flanked the sliding front doors. Eric's grandpa had opened the place back in the fifties or sixties during Ironwood's heyday, and after Grandpa Banner had had his run, Eric's dad took over the store. Eric and Aaron had spent countless summer afternoons sitting up in Eric's dad's office, the title of "Store Manager" stamped on the door. They'd play Operation and Connect Four while Mr. Banner placed phone orders for produce and paper products. Eric had been proud of his dad owning Ironwood's most successful business, gloating about how he'd run the place all on his own one day.

Aaron squinted at the store's bright white façade as he crossed the parking lot on foot, wondering if Eric had changed his tune as he grew older, wondering whether it was possible for anyone in their right mind to *want* to stay in a place like this. Aaron hadn't had the choice of whether to stay or go, but seeing Ironwood for what it was now, he couldn't help but feel that his sudden departure had been a blessing in disguise.

He pushed his cart up and down the aisles, settling on a loaf of white bread, a jar of chunky peanut butter, and some grape jelly. Until water and power allowed him to survive off of frozen pizza and TV dinners, PB&J

would suit him just fine. He and Ryder would have marathons where they'd eat endless crustless sandwiches while watching old *Transformers* episodes.

The girl ringing Aaron up snapped her gum and eyed his tattoos as she ran his purchase over the scanner, her gaze slithering over his arms and neck.

"You a big fan of PB&J?" she asked, dropping the loaf of bread into a paper bag.

Aaron gave her a faint smile as he fumbled with his wallet, struggling to get his credit card free of the plastic holder. Eventually sliding his card through the reader, he waited for his purchase to be approved, unable to help glancing around the place while waiting for his receipt.

"Did you find everything okay?" she asked, flipping her hair over her shoulder. She was wearing an Ironwood Warriors T-shirt beneath her work apron, bright red with a fading screen print of a Greek warrior helmet half-concealed by her bib. "You look like you're forgetting something."

Aaron shook his head, nudging his credit card back into his wallet. "Just looking for someone."

"Who's that?"

"Eric Banner." There was no way Eric had stuck around Ironwood, not with the amount of decline that surrounded the place. Eric's father would have never allowed it.

"You mean the manager?" He watched her expression falter, unnerved but trying to keep her cool—as though she was about to get canned for something she didn't even know she had done—her high ponytail bobbing every time she moved her head. Aaron imagined he looked just as surprised, every nerve buzzing with a fretted sort of fascination.

"He's here?"

"Want me to go get him? Was there, like, a problem or anything?"

"No, no problem." He gathered his paper bag up in his arms. "We went to school together. It was a long time ago. He probably wouldn't even remember me."

"Manager to register two." The cashier's voice boomed through the PA system, crackling as it cut off a muffled eighties tune. Aaron's skin bristled with self-consciousness. He looked like hell, hollow-cheeked and long-limbed. Eric would take one look at him and assume he was some

wasted meth head who was giving his employee trouble. It was embarrassing to know that Eric wouldn't have a point of reference to compare him to, that he'd assume Aaron had looked this way his entire life.

As Aaron stood there, watching the girl ring up another order, he wondered if mentioning Eric had been a mistake, wondered if reconnecting with the ghosts of his past was really what he needed. Doc Jandreau would have said yes, but every muscle in Aaron's body tensed, wound up tight as if ready to spring for the door. He turned away from the bank of registers, deciding it a better idea to simply slink out of the store and into the parking lot, when a question stopped him short.

"What's up?"

Aaron glanced up from the waxed linoleum beneath his feet, the paper bag flush against his chest, his anxiety increasing two-fold when he recognized Eric's face—older yet somehow exactly the same.

"There's a guy here to see you," he heard the cashier say.

His heart thudded in his ears. Over two decades gone and all that had changed with Eric Banner was that his mom had finally forced him to get a haircut. The unruly mop he'd once worn like a hat was now cropped and well-groomed, making his face look out of place.

"Can I help you?" Eric asked.

Aaron watched the forced, managerial smile quirk the corners of Eric's mouth upward. It was a guarded smile, the kind a sales associate gives an edgy customer, fingers crossed behind their back that there wouldn't be a scene.

"Huh." The girl behind the register cocked her hip and crossed her arms over her chest, as if fascinated by the exchange. "You were right," she told Aaron. He adjusted the paper bag against his chest, willing her to stop right there, to not say another word—*just let me leave quietly, forget I was ever here*. "I guess he doesn't recognize you after all."

Eric blinked, then squinted at the man before him, as though peering through slitted eyes would somehow jar his memory. His gaze scrutinized every inch of exposed ink, every flaw, like the dark hollows beneath Aaron's eyes, the shiny scar that ran fat and jagged along the inside of his left arm. Aaron dug up the courage to open his mouth, ready to make up an excuse: *I thought you were someone else, another Eric Banner. Wrong*

person. *Wrong town. Wrong life.* But Eric made a move, stepping around the register bay. His hand fell on Aaron's shoulder while a baffled expression eclipsed his features.

"No way," Eric said quietly, his confusion shifting to a look of disbelief. "You've got to be *kidding* me."

Aaron couldn't help but give his old friend a hint of a smile, his initial anxiety melting into a helpless sort of amusement. Eric was wearing the same stupid expression he used to wear when they were kids, a look that had always cracked Aaron up because it was so full of wonder. But before he could say anything about it, Eric pulled him into an abrupt embrace, Aaron's bag of groceries crushed between them.

"Jesus Christ, what...?" Eric shook his head, struggling for words. "I thought...but you..."

"I know."

"How?"

Aaron offered up a rueful shrug.

The cashier was staring at them, perplexed by their spastic conversation. "Hey, Eric?" She shifted her weight from one white Keds to another, still snapping her gum. "I'm going on break, okay?"

Eric didn't bother glancing her way; his attention was glued to Aaron's face. He idly lifted his right hand in a motion that assured her he didn't care, just go. She slipped by them, smelling of sugar, her ponytail bobbing with each step.

"When did you get back?" It was the first coherent question Eric was able to stitch together.

"Yesterday."

Aaron watched as Eric struggled for words, his smile slowly growing wider as the store manager squared off against his own inability to speak.

"Well," Aaron said after a moment, finding his bearings, "you certainly haven't gotten any better at holding a conversation."

Eric exhaled a flabbergasted laugh and hugged Aaron for a second time. "Christ, that's some ink. I would have never thought." There was a beat of hesitation. Eric shook his head again, still recovering from the shock. "Uh, how are you? I mean, how've you been? Like..."

"Like in the past twenty years?" Aaron asked. "Can't complain." A lie if there ever was one, but with so much time spent apart, it was impossible

to answer honestly. “You finally got your dream job, huh? Living it up in your dad’s shiny office?”

Eric rolled his eyes. “With the faux wood paneled walls and everything. It’s heaven.”

“What happened?”

“I was out until a few years back. Left right out of high school...” So Aaron had been right; Eric *had* bailed. “I was taking business courses out in Little Rock, had an apartment out there. Full scholarship. And then my dad decided to wax the floor and break a hip. He wrecked himself in the bread aisle, couldn’t run this place anymore.” Eric looked around as if seeing the store for the first time. “My legacy, right? It was supposed to be temporary, just until he got back on his feet, but that was almost five years ago.”

Aaron frowned. “He’s still not well enough to come back?”

Eric snorted. “Sure he is, but that doesn’t mean he’s going to. As soon as you get used to someone else doing your work for you, it’s over. There’s no turning back. Anyway...” He waved a hand, dismissing the matter. “What the hell happened to you? One day you were here, the next day, just like that...”

“I know,” Aaron murmured. “I found her on a Friday, spent the weekend at the sheriff’s office while they tried to locate next of kin, ended up getting driven out to Saint Louis, and I was on a plane a few days later. They didn’t let me go back to the house.”

“They,” Eric repeated. “They who?”

“The cops, then the state. Some lady from CPS asked me to make a list of things I wanted to take with me, but I could hardly think straight. The only thing I wrote down was for her to bring me my goddamn Game Boy.”

“God.” Eric looked dismayed by the memory. “We didn’t know what to think. All I knew after a while was that I’d never see you again. We thought you’d at least be at the funeral. When rumor spread of her possibly being buried on the government dime without any fanfare, people chipped in. The church sent the offertory basket around that Sunday and it came back full.”

Bile rose in Aaron’s throat. They had told him there wasn’t going to be a funeral. He had said his final goodbyes to Edie in the cold fluorescent

glow of the coroner's office. Her lips had turned blue, and her skin had taken on a waxy alien-gray hue; he remembered staring at her hair because of how dry and brittle it looked, it too having lost its color. When Aaron insisted he saw Edie breathing, that there was a mistake, that she was still *alive*, a man in scrubs gently led him out of the steel room by his shoulder, explaining that the illusion of the chest rising and falling was normal, a reflex of the living. A day later Aaron found himself on an airplane for the first time in his life, but rather than being fascinated by flight, he only stared out the small oval window and thought about how he should have touched her, how he hated himself for having been afraid to reach out and put his hand into hers.

His whole world had been torn out from under him; his house, his teachers, his friends—everything simply vanished and was replaced by something new. The Ozarks gave way to the enormous pines of the Pacific Northwest, and the rain...the rain felt like it lasted for years. The world wept for her, just as it wept for him. Sorrow came easy beneath the shadow of clouds.

Edie was replaced by Claire and Joseph Tanner—Fletcher's childless, distant West Coast cousins whom Aaron had never heard of, let alone met. For a while he hoped his mother would finally surface, that CPS would manage to find her and she'd whisk him away to California or New York or wherever it was struggling actresses lived. That, however, didn't happen, and on his eighteenth birthday Aaron thanked the Tanners for their hospitality and left their home for a shitty studio apartment. He'd spent most of his time at Cooper's place anyway. Cooper's folks felt more like parents than the Tanners had. It wasn't that the Tanners were bad people, just that the three of them had been strangers. Even after nearly five years together, they had little to talk about. Aaron didn't hold it against them; he was sure they had been relieved when they spotted their emotionally stilted foster kid packing up his things.

"I didn't have any way to reach out," Aaron said. "No phone numbers, nothing like that. These days it would have been easy, but back then..." Back then, despite pining for his friends in Ironwood, he decided to let them go, convinced that it was better that way, that Arkansas held nothing but pain.

“Yeah,” Eric said, looking a little distant. “You always were shit when it came to memorizing numbers.”

They both went silent for a moment, the soft drone of Talk Talk and the blip of cash registers filling the quiet between them. Finally, Eric took a breath and raised both eyebrows in inquiry.

“So, what now?”

“I’m fixing up the house,” Aaron said. “I need to sell it. That’s why I’m here.”

“Seriously?” A shadow of surprise flitted across Eric’s face. “Huh. Well, that’ll be new.” Aaron shook his head, not following. “That house,” Eric said. “It’s a bit of a legend. But that’s a conversation for another time.” He hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “I have to get back.”

“Sure.” Aaron nodded.

“You got a phone?” Eric pulled out his cell and the two exchanged numbers. “I’ll call you,” he said. “Man, the guys are going to shit when I tell them you’re back.”

“The guys? People still live here?”

“Hell, Craig never left, but like *that’s* a surprise. He grew up to be a real winner. Mike got out for a while but ended up coming back a few years later. Family stuff. Cheri’s still here.”

“Seriously?” Aaron’s heart flipped. Something about the idea of seeing Cheri Miller again gave him butterflies, the same ones that had brushed their wings along the inside of his stomach when she had pressed her lips against his in the trees behind his house.

“Yep. She got married last year; shacked up with the guy who owns that new mechanic’s shop just down the street, Vaughn Mechanical.”

“Free tire rotation,” Aaron recalled.

“The guy is a meathead, but he works his ass off. He’s still in business, anyway. Everyone else goes under within six months to a year.” Eric lifted his shoulders up to his ears, backing away. “I’ll call you.”

“Okay.” Aaron raised a hand in goodbye.

“Go to Bennie’s,” Eric told him. “Used to be Fred’s out by the old high school. Get the bacon cheeseburger. It’s incredible.”

Aaron gave Eric a parting smile and turned away, Banner’s automatic doors yawning open. It was impressive the way Eric had played his hand, casually suggesting Aaron eat something. Wandering across the parking

lot in the warmth of what promised to be a stifling summer day, Aaron paused beside his Tercel, glanced back at Banner Goods, and gave the place a crooked half smile.

Eric Banner. He could hardly believe it.

Eric Banner, and Cheri Miller was still in town.

Four

Aaron sat at a tiny table outside of Bennie's Burgers, shielded from the sun by a metal umbrella cemented into the ground. He idly chewed on his bacon cheeseburger, washing it down with sugary soda after every other bite, marveling at the quiet even though Ironwood's main road was only a dozen yards away. The cicadas buzzed in the summer heat, the pulsating rhythm of their song relaxing him, uncoiling every nerve that had ever been wound tight. With the camcorder in the center of the small table, he pointed it toward a thicket of trees and pressed **RECORD**, documenting nothing beyond the calm he felt. It was exactly what his therapist would have suggested; if he got anxious later, he could relive the ease of that moment with the push of a button. He set the remainder of his burger onto a square of wax paper, sucked down another gulp of cola, and stared at the abandoned high school across the street.

The house at the end of Old Mill Road would be a lot of work, but the more he thought about it, the more he relished that fact. He had spent nearly a year of his life doing nothing beyond feeling sorry for himself; he'd spent eleven months crying about things that could never be fixed, too afraid to accept reality to live any semblance of a normal life. It was one of the things that had pushed Evangeline away—his inability to look past what happened, to forgive himself and try to live. But forgiveness had been rendered nearly impossible when he had seen the mangled wreck that had once been the family car.

Cooper had retrieved Aaron's things only days after the accident, but Aaron insisted that his friend had missed something on the first pass, and the guy working in the little trailer in front of the junkyard had waved him through, pointing him in the general direction he needed to go. After half an hour of searching in the drizzling rain, Aaron's breath escaped him in a puff of vapor and failed to return. There, in the steely gray of an autumn morning, was the vehicle that had taken both his and his son's lives. By some strange twist of fate, Cooper had been the closest unit to the accident that night; Aaron's life had been restored by his best friend's refusal to give up hope and let Aaron go. It was ironic that, after being given a second chance, Aaron was the one who gave up. He quit his job as an

EMT, claimed disability, and disappeared down a rabbit hole of antianxiety meds and alcohol.

Perhaps it would have been different had Aaron not visited the junkyard that morning; perhaps he would have found the strength to let the screaming fade to a dull roar inside his head. Maybe he would have finally understood that he and Ryder hadn't stood a chance—the guy who ran the red had been going over sixty miles per hour in a massive pickup truck. When the grille hit the side of Aaron's Honda Fit, it had all but pulverized the sedan. But the fact that the driver of the pickup was stumbling drunk didn't tell the entire story. Ducking his head into the wrecked Fit, Aaron stared at Ryder's car seat toppled over in the back. The seat belt was unlatched, the buckle snagged in the plastic base. Ryder's head had hit against the back passenger window. Seeing the point of impact—the thing that had stolen his son away from him forever—doubled Aaron over in a wave of grief. The guy running the wrecking yard found him kneeling in the mud, soaked to the skin, weeping with his face pressed to the fabric of the backseat. If Aaron had only double-checked to make sure the fucking thing was secure; if he had only taken the time, Ryder wouldn't have missed his eighth birthday.

His parents wouldn't have been on the verge of divorce.

His father wouldn't have been escorted out of a junkyard by Portland PD.

Aaron was still convinced that the only reason he hadn't been placed on involuntary psychiatric hold was because Cooper was an EMT, because the doctors and nurses in the ER knew Aaron, because they would have felt guilty sticking a former coworker in a rubber room.

Taking the last few bites of his burger, he shook the ice in his empty cup and jabbed the straw into the corner, trying to suck up the dregs. If he could fix up the house at the end of Old Mill, he'd at least prove to Evangeline that he hadn't completely folded beneath the grief. It was what she was waiting for, some sign that Aaron was still the man she'd fallen in love with nine years before. For a good six months after Ryder's funeral, he secretly hated her for asking him to stop blaming himself, but Doc Jandreau helped him come to the understanding that Evangeline was blinded by Aaron's all-consuming sorrow.

You have to let her see that you're still in there. You have to dig yourself out from under this mountain of mourning.

If he could fix up the house, it would prove that he was still capable of doing something, *anything*. Aaron had to believe that was all Evangeline wanted—to know that some intrinsic part of him hadn't died out there on the wet pavement, that when Cooper had saved him, he had saved all of him, not just some hollow shell of a man.

His attention wavered when he caught movement from the corner of his eye. There was someone inside the old high school, their shadow cutting across a wall from beyond a shattered window. A ghost of a smile drifted across his lips. Aaron and Cooper had spent many a night pushing their way through ancient houses and old refineries just shy of the northern Pacific Ocean. Bored teens breaking into abandoned buildings was as banal as lonely old ladies surrounding themselves with cats. But just as Aaron was about to pack up and head home, ready to put a dent in the dust and debris that tainted his childhood home, he got an eyeful of the trespasser.

It was the same kid he'd seen at the Blue Ox earlier that morning. The boy stopped inside the building, his ratty hair twisted up into unwashed peaks. Half in and out of shadow and framed by broken glass, his mussed hair nearly looked like a pair of horns. The boy peered at Aaron with a weird sort of scowl, his mouth curling up into a bizarre smile. He slowly raised his hands, linked them together at the thumbs, and with a twist of the lips, flapped them like a pair of bird wings before disappearing into the shadows of the interior.

"What the hell?" Aaron murmured, crumpling his burger wrapper and shoving it into his empty cup. He remembered kids like that from when he still lived here, kids his aunt warned him about, weirdos who could turn a good kid into a miscreant by their presence alone.

As a boy, Aaron was afraid of turning wicked. He subdued his own urges to rip off the wings of butterflies by focusing on music, movies, anything to keep himself occupied. After Edie died, those urges became stronger; he fought against them by smoking stolen cigarettes and drawing razors across his skin where no one would see. Adulthood was easier with tattoos and his job working alongside Cooper as an EMT. Aaron would never admit it, but he got into the profession not because he wanted to

help people, but because of a secret love affair with blood, guts, tragedy, and trauma. Arriving at the scene of a suicide or domestic dispute made him feel a little less alien, as though seeing others in the throes of suffering dissipated his own distress.

After Ryder's sneaker had connected with the ribs of a wandering neighborhood terrier, he taught his own son that channeling aggression was a necessity that couldn't be avoided. He and a then five-year-old Ryder struck a deal to keep Ryder's explosion a secret. As long as Ryder promised to never hurt an animal again, Dad wouldn't tell Mom.

Swinging a leg out from the table's bench seat, he nearly yelped as a crow swept in for a landing on Bennie's open patio. The bird landed with the clack of talons against concrete, dangerously close to Aaron's sneakered feet, and released an aggravated-sounding squawk before hopping across the slab of smooth pavement to an abandoned french fry beneath an adjacent table. Aaron stared at the bird for a moment, surprised by its size, then shot another glance toward Ironwood High. He wasn't surprised the kid was gone. That was the way those types of kids existed, the way *he* had existed after he'd been torn from this place—here one second, gone the next. Had Ryder been granted a longer life, Aaron had no doubt in his mind that he, too, would be crawling through dilapidated buildings and haunting cemeteries. The apple never did fall far from the tree.

Returning to the house at the end of the dead-end street with a belly full of burger and a head full of memories, Aaron waited for water and power to show up. He grabbed the freshly purchased mop, broom, and small artillery of cleaning supplies out of the back of his Tercel and got to work, focusing on his old bedroom and upstairs bathroom first. He didn't have the heart to pull down the leaf-brittle posters from his walls. They were comforting in their own way, just like the old CDs that he played one after the other on the small stereo that was caked in spiderwebs but—with a fresh set of batteries—still worked like a champ. Mouthing the lyrics to the likes of Guns N' Roses and Faith No More, he excavated items that had remained in the same place for over two decades from under a blanket of grime, placing the things he wanted to keep in empty cardboard boxes he had pulled from the U-Haul, dumping the stuff not worth keeping into a pair of garbage bags—one marked DONATE, the other labeled TRASH.

He dusted off the old baseball bat that had been left standing in the corner of the room—the same one in the photograph downstairs—and pulled out his desk drawer, cracking a smile at a pile of Tootsie Pop wrappers, nearly all of them bright red. He remembered how he and Cheri Miller used to squirrel them away, always searching for the little Indian among the gang of printed characters like a poor-kid's version of *Where's Waldo*.

He lifted a bag of marbles from its resting place inside the drawer, spotted a few crumpled dollar bills inside the bright yellow bag—the hiding spot for his life savings—and shoved them into his pocket for safekeeping, refusing to bend beneath the weight of sentimentality that accompanied the constant barrage of memory. He pushed aside a sandwich bag full of Kellogg's box tops and wrapped his fingers around a toy shoved toward the back of the drawer. It was a small stuffed owl, strikingly similar to the one he'd fished out of the backseat of the Honda Fit before Portland PD escorted him out of the junkyard, eerily reminiscent of the one that was now permanently etched into his skin. That dusty little owl had been one of Aaron's prized possessions. He didn't remember where it had come from, just that he had always had it. Perhaps it had been a memento from his mother before she had dumped him on Edie's doorstep and run off to get rich and famous—if that was actually why she had abandoned him in the first place. Regardless of where it had come from, Aaron had always cherished it; so much so that, when he had spotted a similar owl in a toy shop, he ducked inside the store and bought it six months before Ryder had been born.

He tossed the owl into the TO KEEP box, gathered up the dusty sheets and blanket from the bed, and carried them down to the washer and dryer in the basement, only to stop short in front of the two appliances. They were so rusty, so utterly timeworn that he had to laugh. He dropped the sheets at the foot of the two machines and stalked back up the stairs while Axl Rose wailed and Slash killed it on electric guitar.

Stopping in the kitchen to take a swig of lukewarm soda, he stared at the plastic-sheeted window that would be replaced the next day, officially sealing out whoever and whatever had made a habit of wandering through the house. But that small detail still nagged at him; people had broken in—he had seen their footprints in the dust, the wide arcs of sweeping hands

along the walls—but they certainly hadn't come to loot the place. Aaron kept searching for signs of obvious thievery, but everything looked in order. His aunt's delicate cups and saucers were still tucked away behind kitchen cabinets. Her once-polished silver still rested spoon-in-spoon in the drawer beside the sink. Fletcher's collection of Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers tapes were still perfectly stacked next to a now irreparable stereo. Aaron hadn't bothered to check Edie's dresser drawers, but was sure that when he got around to it, he'd find jewelry and family heirlooms.

It would have been less disturbing if the place had been ransacked. At least that would have made sense. But as it stood, it almost seemed as though something had been protecting the contents of the house. The idea of it made his skin prickle up in gooseflesh. He shook off the notion and continued to work despite the steadily rising temperature inside.

By the time water and power arrived, Aaron had finished off two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and mopped his bedroom floor. But rather than celebrating when the lights came on, he groaned instead—dozens of dead moth carcasses were silhouetted against the glow of the few lightbulbs that still worked; yet another couple of tasks to tack on to an already endless list.

He ended up sprawled across his old bed, the floor glinting in the lamplight, the walls clear of spiderwebs and the window so clean that, had there not been a reflection, it would have been invisible to the naked eye. The bathroom down the hall was just as spotless, and as he lay there with his hands folded over his chest, listening to the music of his youth, he couldn't help but be hopeful that the house served as a metaphor for his own life—it was broken now, but one room at a time, it would be resurrected into something livable, bearable. It would never be as it had once been, but maybe, despite it all, it could be patched together again.

Though, if it couldn't, that revolver was still safely tucked away in the trailer outside.

Evangeline stood at the top of the stairs, looking toward Aaron's old room with a thoughtful smile. The sunshine that filtered through the upstairs windows cast a fiery halo around her face, her red hair glinting in the sun. She pivoted on the bare soles of her feet, her wedding dress brushing across the tops of her toes as she twisted in place. Her smile brightened when a boy appeared in the doorway of Aaron's childhood

room—a child that was cast in silhouette. The boy stepped forward as if to meet her, but rather than moving through the upper breezeway, he jutted both arms outward, as if throwing an invisible net toward the bride. Evangeline's smile wavered, confusion darkening her expression as a cyclone of shadow spun behind the boy, spilling out around him in a flurry of feathered wings.

She exhaled a gasp, lifting her arms to shield herself from the onslaught of birds, screaming out as they pecked at her flesh, tarnishing the flawless tapestry of her dress with dashes of red. She swatted her arms around her face in a frantic attempt to scare them away, only to lose her footing and fall back into empty space.

She drifted backward in slow motion, her eyes wide, her mouth an O of startled surprise, her red hair fluttering about her face like water, folding in on herself bit by bit, each crash against the stairs setting her limbs akimbo. Coming to an abrupt stop at the foot of the stairwell, she released a strangled cry of pain; but despite her collapse, she began to crawl, stretching her arms toward her only source of hope—the front door, so close yet so far away.

The boy leapt down the stairs with a laugh, whooping as he danced around the weeping bride like a savage, stomping on her hands, mashing her fingers against the hardwood floor. When the woman rolled onto her back—her hands held out in defense—Evangeline's face was replaced by Edie's pleading gaze, but the boy paid no mind. He drew a kitchen knife from the back pocket of his pants, straddled his victim with a dangerous smile, and brought the blade down swift and unswerving, stabbing, stabbing, stabbing until her screams dwindled down to nothing and her blood ran free.

Aaron jerked upright in his old bed. His heart leaped into his throat.

Someone was crouched just beyond the closed closet door, motionless, watching him sleep.

His mouth went dry at the possibility; the kitchen window was broken, someone could have gotten in. His mind reeled. The gun: it was still in the trailer, as though it was of any use out there. His brain expanded and contracted with the thudding of his pulse. He opened his mouth to speak, nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard the shuffling of footsteps downstairs.

His gaze darted to the open bedroom door.

There were people in the house; someone other than the person gargoyling in the corner of the room, staring at him through the dark.

He could hear them distinctly as they dragged their feet across the hardwood floor.

Aaron's attention shot back to the figure in the corner of the room, but now all he saw was his jacket hanging from a hook on the outside of the closet door. An overactive imagination.

A girl's whimpering moan had him bolting out of bed, not sure what the hell he was supposed to do. There was no denying that someone was inside. His heart pounded so hard against his ribs it made him queasy with agitation. A single thought jammed his circuits: *Say something; let them know you're here.*

"Hello?" His voice rattled inside his throat, dry and unnerved. He grimaced at how weak he sounded, forced air from his lungs and spoke again. "This is private property." He paused, listened. "I have a gun"—an afterthought. He shoved the window curtain aside and looked down into the side yard, but nobody was there. He imagined he'd see a car parked just shy of the driveway along Old Mill if he could see the road from where he stood, but he'd have to dart into Edie's bedroom for that. He inched his way toward the open bedroom door, his pulse rattling his teeth.

Maybe he was being robbed—but why would they choose to rob the place *now*, after someone had moved in? Maybe it was a couple of idiot kids rummaging around downstairs to purposely freak him out—that kid, the one who had been exploring the abandoned high school. There had been something menacing about the boy, who couldn't have been older than thirteen or fourteen years old, something disconcerting about his cockeyed grin.

Aaron was sure that all of Ironwood already knew who he was—the new guy living in the dilapidated house. The waitress and the water guy, the person he'd called about replacing the window and the cashier at Banner Goods—there were more than enough locals to start rumors and kick-start curiosity.

Aaron sidled up to the upstairs banister and looked down the flight of stairs, his palms sweating, his stomach knotted and gurgling around too much peanut butter and bread. "Is anybody there?" No answer. He stood

in the silence, holding his breath, his ears straining to pick up the faintest hint of sound.

There was a crash from below: a piece of furniture being toppled over.

His stomach dropped. He bit back a yell. The hair on his arms stood on end. Reason told him to stay where he was, but instinct was pushing him down that flight of stairs one bare foot after the other, the grit that still clung to each step grainy against the soles of his feet. The thought of calling the cops didn't enter his mind until it was far too late. Reaching the bottom step, he pressed his back flush against the hallway wall, nearly choking on rapid bursts of breath.

There was another shuffle in the front room.

His eyes darted in the darkness, searching for something he could use as a weapon. Aaron slinked down the hall, the broom he'd purchased less than a day before propped against the wall. He snatched it from where it stood, and readjusted his grip on the handle, ready to swing the thing as hard as a major league batter the moment he spotted an intruder.

He stopped at the threshold of the living room, preparing himself for whoever might be there, expecting to see a couple of punk kids tearing into the few boxes of things he'd brought in from the U-Haul and stacked against the wall beside the front door. The rustling continued near one of the front windows, its source concealed by the dusty couch in the center of the room. His head spun at the possibility of someone hiding back there, waiting to leap out at him just like Cooper had warned.

You want to get your head on straight, you stay here. You want an ax murderer to chop the fucking thing off, you go to Arkansas.

Aaron had laughed off Cooper's warning over a couple of beers on his last night back home, but he no longer found the idea funny. Swallowing against the lump in his throat, he took a few slow steps forward, the broom held aloft, ready to swing at anything that dared jump out at him from the shadows.

"I hear you," he warned, trying like hell to keep his voice steady. "You'd better make yourself known before I shoot you in the fucking face."

No reply.

He gritted his teeth hard enough to give himself a headache, increased his grip on the broom handle so tightly his hands ached with the strain.

Slowly stepping toward the sofa, he prepared himself for what seemed like the inevitable attack, bending at the knees so his center of gravity was low, carefully placing his feet in a way that, if someone came barreling out from behind that couch, they wouldn't bowl him over when they rushed him. With a final raspy breath, Aaron leaped around the sofa's arm and readied himself to swing, only to exhale a breath and lower his weapon.

A starling lay on its side, writhing next to an overturned end table, one of its wings limply stretched outward. The initial sight of it made his blood run cold—the bride, the stairs, the oncoming surge of flapping wings.

"Christ," he breathed, shoving his fingers through his hair. He had cleared out the pile of dead birds from the corner of the front room just that afternoon, occasionally finding another carcass in various rooms throughout the house. Twisting where he stood, he searched for some way to pick up the animal. He'd lifted the others with his hands gloved in garbage bags, but this one would require a bit more finesse.

Pushing a window curtain aside to peer toward his uncle's shed, he considered trekking outside to search for a flat-edged shovel. It would serve well as a gurney while allowing him to keep his distance, the image of Evangeline standing at the top of the stairs trying to fight those birds off still fresh in his mind. But before he could decide on whether he wanted to dig around the shed in the dead of night, he saw something shift just beyond Edie's flowering rosemary.

It was the weird kid who had slammed his hands against the diner window—the same one who had flapped his hands like an avian shadow puppet and flashed an impish grin.

"Hey," Aaron blinked at the boy through the window. "*Hey!*" He rapped on the glass despite the kid staring right at him.

The boy wasn't fazed. He simply gave Aaron a sour smile and turned away, ducking into the trees.

Five

The camcorder's picture jostled as Aaron crouched on the gravel driveway, pointing the lens at his front driver's-side tire. There was a slash in the rubber the size of a knife blade.

"See that?" he asked the camera, turning the lens on himself. "Cooper warned me about psycho killers, but not about bastard kids with butterfly knives."

He swept the camera along the tree line, searching for the culprit among the leaves. A few seconds later, he was sliding the recorder onto the roof of his Tercel and looking back at the tire. The last time he'd caught a flat, he'd bolted on the donut tire and driven it to a local shop—one that had failed to stick the spare back in his trunk. He had meant to call them about it for weeks, but after a month had passed in an alcohol-induced haze, he had lost his opportunity to complain. Of course, he hadn't bothered to replace the stupid thing with another, thinking, *What are the odds?* Now, the odds were staring him right in the face. Murphy's law. As far as Aaron was concerned, Murphy was a grade-A dick.

He fished his cell phone out of his pocket and stared at it as his brain tripped over itself, struggling to remember the name of the mechanic's shop he'd seen in town, the one Eric had mentioned was owned by Cheri's husband. *Free tire rotation with every oil change.* "Not like it matters," he muttered, dialing 411, glaring at the flat while waiting for the call to connect. He could call the mechanic's shop all he wanted, but unless he had some magical way of teleporting the Tercel from here to there, he was going to need a tow.

As odds would have it, the tow truck that arrived was marked VAUGHN MECHANICAL across the front doors. The truck crunched up the driveway; its massive tow hitch rising from where the truck bed should have been, swinging and clanging behind the vehicle like a broken arm. Aaron knew it was irrational, but the sight of that massive grille momentarily gutted him. For a split second, all he could see was that grille screaming toward him; he could hear the screech of rubber, the explosion of safety glass, could smell the sharp odor of gasoline mingling with the scent of rain. He pulled himself out of that flash of nightmare when he noticed the driver sitting in the truck for what seemed like longer than necessary, but the

man eventually ambled out of the dually, pulling the hem of a too-short T-shirt down over his potbelly—a shirt that sported a cartoon drawing of a giant fish, the tagline beneath it reading: *Quit staring at my bass*.

Aaron met the guy in the driveway while shielding his eyes from the glare of the sun. “Hi,” he greeted, the driver already inspecting the slashed tire on the Tercel. “Thanks for coming out,” Aaron continued. “I know it’s out of the way.”

The guy looked up from the tire, allowed his gaze to linger on Aaron for an awkwardly long moment, then glanced to the house in the background with a dubious expression. “That’s okay,” he said after a beat. “Just doin’ my job.” He gave Aaron another look, bushy eyebrows furrowed across the ridge of his eyes like a fuzzy shelf. “You the Holbrook kid?” he asked.

Aaron couldn’t help but blink in surprise.

“Yes?” The reply came out as a question, Aaron not sure whether or not being “the Holbrook kid” was a good thing or not.

The driver screwed up his mouth like he was ready to spit, peering at the house again before turning his attention back to Aaron’s car. “Looks like you got yourself a flat,” he announced.

Aaron bit the inside of his mouth to keep from grinning like an idiot. If anything should have been recorded for posterity, Mr. Bass was it. “Looks like it,” he said, desperate to keep a straight face.

“Don’t you got a spare?”

Aaron released a faint laugh. “I did,” he said, leaving it at that.

“But not no more,” Mr. Bass finished for him, scratching his head beneath the plastic mesh of his company hat.

Without saying another word, Mr. Bass climbed back into his truck and threw it into reverse, as though he’d decided to forget the whole thing and go back to the shop without Aaron or the handicapped Toyota. But instead of taking off down Old Mill, he backed the dually into position, climbed out of the truck for the second time, and began to hook the two vehicles together in unholy matrimony.

Once the hookup was complete, Aaron joined the driver inside the cabin of his gigantic truck. He snapped his seat belt into place and stared down the slight decline of the driveway, ignoring the fact that the inside of the pickup reeked of Corn Nuts and sweat. *Par for the course*, he thought.

Mr. Bass spoke again only after the tow truck and its load were safely out on Old Mill Road.

“Son,” he murmured, shooting Aaron a distrustful glance. “Rumor has it you’re supposed to be dead.”

There was a shoddy missing dog poster tacked to a corkboard inside Vaughn Mechanical’s lobby. Sitting in a metal folding chair between two racks of tires, Aaron couldn’t look away from it. It hurt to look at, from the way the Xeroxed black-and-white photograph was too dark to make out any distinct features to the handwritten text offering a reward, the writing straight at first only to sadly arch down the page in a hopeless frown.

Aaron lifted a lidded Styrofoam cup of soda to his chest—a smiling soft-serve cone maniacally grinning from the cup’s curved side—and bowed his head to catch the straw between his lips, his gaze still fixed on that terrible full-page sign. The thing was useless, omitting essential information like breed and distinctive markings. It didn’t even list the animal’s name. The flier spoke volumes about that particular corner of the Ozarks. Rough. Undereducated. Reeking of a weird sort of desperation.

“Holbrook?” A beefy-looking guy stepped from beyond a double-hinged door and slunk behind the counter. He was a metal head; the kind of guy who wore sleeveless tanks and biker boots and saw GWAR live in concert. Aaron didn’t need to stand next to the mechanic to know the guy would tower over him by a good few inches, at least six foot three, and a hundred pounds heavier than Aaron’s current weight. Aaron wondered if this was the man Cheri Miller had chosen to spend the rest of her life with—a guy so unlike himself it was like night and day. The guy wiped his hands on a rag and swung his rocker hair over his shoulder with a flourish, pulling it back with dirty hands before twisting it into a rope and coiling it at the back of his head—an old lady’s bun, messy, almost immediately unraveling beneath the weak hold of an office-grade rubber band.

Aaron rose from his seat between the racks of tires and approached the front counter, his soda in tow. After an hour of waiting for his tire to be replaced, he’d marched across the street to Mr. Ice Cream for a drink. Now he was no longer thirsty, and the cup was little more than a watered-down nuisance. But because Vaughn’s lobby didn’t have a trash can, Aaron continued to drink the lukewarm cola out of absentminded

boredom. Arriving at the counter, he looked down at a handwritten invoice dotted with greasy fingerprints.

“Sign here,” the guy said, tapping the bottom margin of the top carbon with a chewed-up blue BIC.

Aaron grimaced at the total at the bottom of the page—nearly two hundred bucks including the tow. After Evangeline had insisted on separating, Aaron lived off of disability and dipped into his share of savings to fund a fast-burgeoning drinking problem. Now, having reevaluated his goals, he was determined to spend every last penny on resurrecting Aunt Edie’s house to its previous glory. If it helped him win Evangeline back, it was worth the cost; but the cost would undoubtedly be higher than expected, and car maintenance wasn’t the way he wanted to spend his cash. He begrudgingly scribbled his name across the bottom of the invoice and the mechanic grunted, eyeing the feathered wings that wrapped around Aaron’s neck like two delicate hands. The mechanic tore the top copy away from a yellow carbon beneath it, slid the canary-colored copy across the counter and murmured, “Wait here, I’ll get your keys,” before stepping back into the garage.

Aaron folded the yellow copy into eighths, tucked it into the back pocket of his jeans, and looked back to the corkboard that was now less than a few feet from his shoulder. The picture of the dog was even harder to make out up close, like one of those optical illusions you have to look at from yards away. The little bell above the front door jingled, pulling his attention back to the lobby. A woman struggled with the door, her arms loaded down with fast-food bags and a full drink carrier. Aaron took a quick step away from the counter, holding the door open for her just as the drinks tipped in her hand, one of the sodas leaning precariously to the side. He made a move to save it, but he wasn’t quick enough. The drink tumbled to the ground and exploded against the linoleum, splashing across Aaron’s sneakers and the bottom of his jeans.

“Shit,” she hissed, dropping the bags of food onto the closest lobby chair. Pressing her hands to her temples as she watched the caramel-colored mess fizz against the tile, she murmured, “Goddamnit, I’m so sorry,” noting Aaron’s wet shoes.

Aaron was smiling long before their eyes met. It was her...his first flurry of butterflies, his first kiss, his first taste of puppy love.

“It’s okay,” he told her, “Though if you could get me a discount on my tire change, that would be great.”

Unlike Eric, who looked like an overgrown child stuffed into a polo, Cheri appeared nothing like the fourteen-year-old girl he’d left behind so long ago, somewhat awkward and all-eyes. She had always been pretty, but now she was stunning. Easy loops of red hair framed her face. Her bow-like mouth was reminiscent of early twentieth-century starlets; and her wide, doe eyes—which still looked too big for her face—gave her an almost alien beauty.

Cheri released a quiet laugh and nervously shoved strands of long red hair behind her ears. She opened her mouth to speak, paused, gave him a curious look. “Have we met?”

Aaron smiled down at his cola-soaked sneakers. Even with his eyes diverted, he could still feel her staring at him, trying to place his face.

“Maybe I’m just going crazy,” she told herself. “Don’t move.” She turned to step behind the counter, but Aaron moved, wading out of the center of the mess to stand on a square of dry tile. The soda was seeping through the canvas of his sneaker and into the tops of his socks.

Cheri returned with a roll of paper towels, a trash bag, and a spray bottle of cleaner. Aaron reached for the towels, tore off a long strip, and helped her mop up the sticky lake. It took her a minute, but she eventually looked up at him again, still baffled, struggling to place where she’d seen him before.

“You’re not from here,” she concluded.

“Used to be,” he said, tearing off a fresh square of towel and patting the tops of his shoes.

“Yeah? Somehow I doubt that.”

Aaron raised a questioning eyebrow and she shrugged.

“Nobody comes back here once they leave,” she told him. “It would be like breaking *into* prison. Once you’re out, you don’t look back.”

“Eric Banner came back.” Aaron casually dropped the detail.

Cheri stopped sopping up cola and peered at him instead. Her lips parted as she leaned back on her heels and searched his face, watching him from behind a scarlet veil. Aaron’s heart twisted when she gave him a look he still remembered—a look that struggled for understanding. She had worn the same expression when he had tried to teach her how to play

chess in his bedroom, had worn the exact same look while trying to comfort him after Uncle Fletcher had died.

“Do I really look that different?” he asked her. “Come on, Scary.” A nickname he’d given her long ago, born of her penchant for all things spooky—movies, books, the Cure.

Cheri’s brown eyes glazed over, shimmering with disbelief. “Oh my God,” she whispered, so quiet that he hardly heard her. “Aaron...?” She was on her feet before he could confirm her suspicion, her arms coiling around him, her face pressing into his neck.

It felt strange to have a woman other than Evangeline so close. He had expected to tense up as soon as she was in his arms, but he caught himself inhaling her scent instead—shampoo and red berries, a lingering undertone of cigarette smoke. His nerves prickled as the sound of a small, choked sob surfaced from the folds of his faded T-shirt. Eventually, Cheri took a step back, frantically wiping at her eyes, looking genuinely surprised at her own response.

“Christ, I hardly recognized you. What are you doing here? When did you get back?” She held the pointer finger of each hand beneath her eyes as she rolled them up to the ceiling, trying not to smear her mascara.

“Getting my tire replaced.” Aaron nodded at the unmanned counter. “Came back a few days ago.”

“What the hell happened?” A new voice. The metal head mechanic stepped around the counter, Aaron’s keys dangling from his fingers.

“I spilled the soda.” Cheri sniffled, turning away from her husband so he wouldn’t notice her red-rimmed eyes. “It’s no big deal. Aaron, this is Miles.” Cheri motioned toward the guy approaching them.

“You know each other?” Miles asked, tossing Aaron the keys from the other side of the shop. Aaron was slow to react. The keys flew through the air and hit him in the chest. With his right hand full of wadded-up towels, he tried to save the keys with his left, but they tumbled to the ground, landing in a syrupy pool.

“We knew each other as kids,” Cheri said. “We haven’t seen each other in...” She shot Aaron a look.

“Twenty-one years.”

“Jesus.” Cheri stared at him, surprised by how much time had passed. “Seriously?”

Aaron nodded. “We were fourteen.”

Miles stared at Aaron for a long moment, as if sizing him up, though there wasn’t much to size—Miles was a beast, his work shirt stretched tight across a bulging chest. Cooper would have made his usual crack—a full-grown man wearing Baby Gap—the kind of guy who let off steam by pressing weights in the garage and bought whey protein in bulk.

“Cool,” Miles said, bereft of any real emotion or interest. Not bothering to apologize for dumping Aaron’s keys in a lake of soda, he turned and walked away from them both.

“Husband?” Aaron asked after Miles was out of earshot. He crouched, plucked his keys from the mess, and continued to help Cheri clean the floor.

“Word travels fast,” Cheri murmured. “Or did you just guess?”

“Eric mentioned wedding bells. Congrats.”

She smiled somewhat sheepishly and offered up a demure sort of shrug. “It wasn’t that big a deal. You know how it is, one shotgun shy of a hillbilly hoedown. What about you? Where’s teen dream Barbie?”

Aaron’s smile wavered, then faded completely.

“Sore subject?” she asked, then shook her head as if to stop him from responding. “Never mind. It’s none of my business. Are you out at your old place? Jesus, what *happened* to you, Aaron? We didn’t know...we thought...”

He didn’t want to know what she and Eric had thought, didn’t want to consider the confusion, the worry, the hurt of losing a friend. The three of them had been like musketeers, always together, be it at one another’s houses or pounding the pavement in their dusty sneakers. They spent entire summers outside, wandering from street to street, their shoulders burning in the sun as they trudged from the community pool to the Dairy Queen and back again. Eric’s dad had helped them build a tree house in Eric’s backyard, and Cheri would sneak her mom’s chocolate chip cookies up there in her backpack. The boys would taunt her with earthworms on the banks of Bull Shoals Lake, the three of them spending more time untangling their fishing line than catching carp and catfish. As they got older, they replaced fishing trips with tape decks and portable radios. They would gather around Aaron’s boom box and listen to FM radio while

playing Crazy Eights with a set of bent-cornered cards, ready to hit RECORD as soon as the DJ played one of their favorite songs.

A few weeks after they had both begun their freshman year as Warriors, Aaron found her sitting on the front porch steps of Holbrook House, waiting for him to arrive home from school. She had missed class that day, and when Aaron finally saw her he knew something had happened, something that had left her big eyes red and her cheeks swollen with too many tears. Aaron dropped his backpack onto the steps before they wandered into the trees surrounding the house, and in the sun-dappled shade Cheri told him that Pepper, her old chocolate Lab, had finally passed away. He watched her bottom lip quiver and her chin pucker with emotion as she fought to keep her composure, but it was no use. Cheri burst into a fresh fit of tears and Aaron held her as she wept. When she was finally able to pull herself together, he brushed strands of hair from her wet face, a new sensation stirring at the pit of his stomach. She moved to step away from him, to put some distance between them, but Aaron failed to release one of her hands from his grasp. Cheri's eyes glistened wet and dazzling in the sun, her sorrow replaced by a look of nervous fascination as he pulled her back toward him, his heart drumming so hard inside his chest the ground tilted dangerously beneath his feet. Aaron cupped Cheri's face between his hands and pressed his mouth against hers, and everything changed.

Cheri exhaled a breath and sprayed the floor with cleaner. "We waited for years," she said softly. "We gathered up all the photographs we could find with you in them and we'd lay them out on the boards of the old tree house every few days. You know how Eric is, always superstitious. He thought we could summon you somehow, or at least summon an answer about where you had gone."

Aaron swallowed against the slow-growing lump in his throat. He stared down at his hands, feeling guilty. He supposed he could have demanded to go home, could have insisted on seeing his friends one last time, but he hadn't wanted to. After seeing Edie that way, the idea of being given a whole other life had been as appealing as it had been terrifying; getting as far away from that house as possible had too alluring a pull.

"He's still like that, you know: superstitious."

“Some things never change,” Aaron murmured.

“But you have,” she said. “A lot. I didn’t even recognize you. If you hadn’t said something, I wouldn’t have had a clue.”

Again, Aaron found himself silent. His feet were cold and wet, his thighs were starting to cramp from crouching on the floor for so long; his chest felt tight.

“I want to say you look good, Aaron. I want to tell you that you look *great*, but—”

“But I don’t.” He cut her off. “I know.”

“Why?” she asked. “What happened?”

He shook his head, not ready to reveal that much, at least not in the lobby of her husband’s shop. “I’m fixing up the house,” he said, changing the subject. “Going to try to sell the place.”

Cheri didn’t respond. She looked down to the wet linoleum and sprayed more cleaner instead. She was holding back, but he couldn’t blame her. It was the wrong place, the wrong time. Finally, she cleared her throat and glanced to the bags of fast food sitting on one of the folding chairs. “I should go,” she told him. “The guys are probably starving back there.”

Aaron nodded.

“But I’ll see you around, right?” she asked. She looked uneasy, as though if she let him walk out of that shop, it would be the last time she’d ever see him. He supposed it was a legitimate fear.

“Please,” he replied, a single word summing up his hope. He wanted to see her again. It was a feeling of unexpected comfort; if he stayed in Ironwood for long enough, his life would patch itself back together, things would somehow be okay.

Cheri smiled softly before gathering up the bags of food in her arms. “Okay,” she said, “after all, I know where you live.”

Aaron wanted to hug her again, but he resisted the urge. He stood, managed to drum up a ghost of a grin. “Come by anytime.”

“Anytime?”

“Anytime.”

She gave the linoleum a bashful glance and nodded. “I’ll see you later, Aaron.”

“See you later, Scary.”

Shaking her head one last time, she stepped across the lobby and ducked behind the counter, disappearing into the back.

The moment Cheri stepped into her cramped little office, she felt like she was going to cry. Allowing the bags of fast food to drop to her desk, she flung herself into her chair and covered her face with her hands. She couldn't process it. She had convinced herself that Aaron would never return, that she'd never see him again because somehow, somewhere, he had died. It had been the only explanation, the only way she knew how to let him go. And now, as if by magic, Aaron Holbrook had reappeared.

Cheri took a steadying breath and let her hands fall from her eyes, but her heart jumped into her throat. Miles was standing in the doorway of the office, his square shoulders filling the frame. He was watching her, catching her at her most vulnerable.

Miles approached Cheri's desk without a word, pulling open one of the crumpled fast-food bags to peer inside. He sat down in the chair across from her, casually unwrapped a burger, and took a bite. Cheri kept her eyes diverted, not sure what to say. He was radiating disapproval, mute as he let it deepen into a typical slow burn. Forcing herself into action, she grabbed one of the bags and pulled it into her lap, fished out a paper sleeve of fries and shoved a few in her mouth, determined to ride out Miles's unnerving silence with her own brand of quiet.

This sort of standoff had become commonplace. They'd break each other down with silence until one of them cracked; then they'd bicker back and forth until their verbal jousting reaching its zenith with one of them speaking a little too loudly, saying something a bit too harsh. That was when the real screaming would begin.

At first, these altercations had been limited to the privacy of their own home, but that was no longer the case. The guys in the garage had been privy to more than a couple of barn burners during the past few months.

Cheri pushed another fry into her mouth, breathing a quiet sigh as she chewed. Something about her exhale spurred Miles to speak.

"Why were you crying?" he asked flatly, staring at her from across the desk.

Cheri momentarily clenched her teeth, then tried to relax.

"I was just surprised," she told him. "I haven't seen him in forever."

Glancing up at her husband, she waited for him to let it go.

"I thought he was dead," she added, as though Aaron's dreamed-up passing would make Miles feel better about what he had seen—Cheri crying on another guy's shoulder, her arms wrapped around a stranger in a way they hadn't wrapped around Miles in over six months.

"Why would you think that?" Miles asked.

She grimaced at his question. He was fishing for ammunition, ready to use her own words against her.

"Because he disappeared." She dared to look him in the eyes. "He was my best friend and he literally vanished overnight. It was a little traumatic."

"I get it," he said.

Cheri tensed, sensing the onslaught.

"You had to lie to yourself to get over it. To get over *him*."

"I was fourteen," she countered.

"And I lost my virginity a year before that. What's your point?"

Cheri rolled her eyes and stood up, stepping around her desk.

"Where are you going?" Miles's annoyance was inching into his tone.

"To get myself a soda."

"There's soda right here." He pushed the drink carrier toward her.

"Those are for the guys. I spilled mine." Rifling through her bag, she fished out a small coin purse and headed toward the door. There was a soda machine along the side of the shop, one that Miles stocked full of generic brands rather than buying the kind that were displayed behind the clear plastic of the machine's buttons.

"Cheri."

She stopped just beyond the door, closing her eyes for a moment before turning to face him. "What?"

He watched her for a long moment, as though carefully choosing what he was going to say. Eventually, he leaned back in his seat and stretched his legs out in front of him. "Tell the guys lunch is here."

Cheri chewed on the inside of her cheek before turning away again. "Sure," she muttered, then stepped out of the office and ducked into the garage.

Six

Aaron could see the kid from the driveway. Sitting inside his Tercel, he considered slamming his foot onto the gas, barreling past Uncle Fletcher's tool shed, and chasing that little bastard off. Whoever this brat was, he had already cost Aaron nearly two hundred bucks. But the more he considered waging a full-out war, the worse the idea seemed. Engaging in battle would mean retaliation, and payback would inevitably result in more vandalism. A truce would be better. After all, the house had been standing vacant for so many years; it could have been said that Aaron was the intruder. In a town where there was nothing to do, he was effectively taking away a local haunt.

He slid out of the car, leaving the driver's door open between him and the boy, but before Aaron could motion the kid over, the trespasser turned tail and ducked into the trees. Aaron considered following, but he thought better of it. He'd wasted the entire morning at Vaughn's. The window replacement guy was due any minute, and he'd hardly put a dent in the catastrophe that awaited him inside.

Climbing up the porch steps, he frowned at the skeletal bushes that he'd either need to dig up or cut down, made a note in his phone to buy porch netting the next time he visited the hardware store, and unlocked the door. He was only half aware of what he was doing when he stepped inside, his attention fixed on the cell phone held fast in the palm of his hand. Walking blind, he stopped short when the tip of his sneaker made contact with something soft on the floor. When he realized what it was, his stomach dropped to his feet.

A mound of dead birds were heaped in the center of the room.

Aaron took a reflexive backward step, shielding his nose and mouth with his forearm; the smell was faint but distinct, and the fast-rising heat of the day wouldn't be doing those birds any favors.

"Son of a bitch," he hissed.

It was too much of a coincidence. That bastard kid had watched Aaron leave with the tow guy, then helped himself inside through the busted kitchen window.

Aaron pivoted on the soles of his shoes and marched outside, sidestepped the front yard, and came to a stop along the side of the house.

The garbage bag he used to dump the birds he'd originally found in the front room was gone. His eyes darted to the tree line, searching for the little shit despite the glare of the sun. If Aaron saw that pint-sized prick again he'd have to hold himself back. But before he could dwell on what he wanted to do to the kid—bend his arm behind his back, jab toothpicks beneath his fingernails, stuff his mouth full of feathers freshly plucked from putrefying starlings—a white pickup came into view. Aaron's fresh kitchen window momentarily blinded him as the truck slowly turned up the drive.

Aaron tossed out the birds for a second time and worked between the living room and kitchen while the window guy installed the glass. By the time the install was complete, Aaron had managed to clear the dust and cobwebs from the walls. After paying the guy, Aaron continued to chisel away the bird crap that had dried on the fireplace mantel and various windowsills, dusted the furniture in the front room, and both swept and mopped the ground-level floors. And by then, thoughts of Eric and Cheri coupled with a dose of early nineties Pearl Jam had all but diffused his desire for revenge.

He ended up standing in the kitchen, staring into the stale-smelling refrigerator that whined and groaned as it tried to cool down. He had been too overwhelmed by memories and filth to dare look inside it until now. Thankfully, someone had been kind enough to empty it of its contents before leaving the house to fend for itself—probably someone from the church, if what Eric had said about everyone banding together had been true. Aaron had just barely scratched the surface of the cleaning that needed to be done, but he decided then and there that if he was going to sweat his ass off throughout the summer, he'd be doing it in the company of cold beer.

Just as he was about to head back out to Banner's for brews and a few pints of ice cream, his cell buzzed against his hip. It was Eric.

"Meet me at Stonehenge at nine," Eric said. "You remember how to get there?"

"Not in the slightest," Aaron said. He remembered the place, but finding his way there was a whole other matter.

After finding the street he needed to take, thanks to the GPS on his phone, Aaron guided his car along the wooded road, his alignment off as

he rolled on three old tires and one new one. He grumbled when the road turned to dirt, the washboard surface shaking the Tercel so violently it was a wonder he didn't lose his muffler along the way. A quarter of a mile down the road, he spotted the glow of an unseen bonfire bleaching the deep indigo sky to a paler shade of blue.

He pulled up next to a beat-up Ford, leaned back in his seat, and took a deep breath. Something about this meeting felt finite, as though showing his face to the ghosts of his childhood would seal his fate and brand him as a bona fide Ironwood resident. But he'd already told Eric he'd come, and it wasn't Aaron's style to bail.

Tucked into the Ozarks like some ancient burial ground, Stonehenge was nothing more than a clearing a dozen miles outside of Ironwood proper along one of the fingers of Bull Shoals Lake. They called it Stonehenge because the oaks and maples had been cut down in a near perfect circle, and a handful of odd-shaped rocks jutted out of the ground every few feet. It was where the high school kids would congregate on weekends, thinking that nobody but them knew about the place—but in truth, even Aunt Edie and Uncle Fletcher had swilled cheap whiskey among those rocks.

With a six-pack of microbrew in tow, Aaron followed a beaten path through the trees and bushes to where the fire blazed, a faint spark of excitement igniting in the pit of his stomach. Pushing through that bracken made him feel young again; it reminded him of the times he and Cooper would meet friends on Rockaway Beach, when the only thing they had to worry about was how to score booze. Rockaway had become a haven—the perfect place to sit with Evangeline beneath his arm, a blanket wrapped around them both, Evangeline's head on his shoulder as they watched the breakers crash onto the shore. Stonehenge was the Rockaway of Ironwood, the place where the youth of a forgotten corner of the world would sit, drink, and watch the moon's reflection travel across the lake.

As soon as Aaron stepped into the clearing, a unified cheer rose up around the fire, awakening a newfound excitement to reconnect with the friends of his past. Eric met Aaron next to the tree line and patted him on the back with a wide smile. His button-down manager's polo had been replaced by an old Silverchair T-shirt, and his jeans sagged a few inches below his hips, crumpling at the base of a pair of worn-out Converse

kicks. There were a few girls on the opposite side of the clearing, but they kept their distance despite glancing Aaron and Eric's way. They looked young, stealthily passing a square bottle between themselves as they glanced over their shoulders, probably whispering to one another about the guy they didn't recognize—someone new, because everyone in Ironwood knew everyone else.

"We were worried you had changed your mind," Eric said, still slapping Aaron on the back.

"I stopped off at your place for beer." Aaron surrendered the six-pack to Eric while a guy stepped forward from across the fire, a Bud Light in one hand, his free hand extended toward Aaron to shake.

"Aaron," he said. "How the fuck are ya?" His sandy blond hair framed his face like a shoulder-length curtain, the silver half-inch gauges that were shoved through his earlobes glinting in the firelight.

Aaron grabbed the guy's hand, not sure who he was regarding, and the guy laughed at Aaron's blank expression.

"You don't remember me? Mike, man. Mike Faust."

Aaron cracked a grin. If there had been a fourth musketeer, Mike Faust would have been it. He was Eric's cousin, three years older and two grades above them both. Aaron and Eric had always regarded Mike as the "cool" one, the guy who heard all the new music first, who played the best video games and made out with his girlfriend in front of them like it was no big deal. A junior when Aaron had left, Mike had been the one to introduce Aaron and Eric to the likes of Soundgarden, Alice in Chains, and the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

The button-down flannel Mike wore over his T-shirt did little to hide his slow-growing paunch. He looked rough, tired, like the past two decades had bounced him from one hardship to another. Silently, Aaron appreciated Mike's worse-for-wear appearance. It made him feel a little less out of place, a little more connected.

"Jesus, dude, where the fuck did you go?" Mike asked. "We thought you were dead. Nearly held a funeral and everything."

"Why didn't you?"

"Funds, man. Caskets are fucking expensive. We thought about using a shoe box, but that didn't feel right. I mean, we didn't even have a body."

Aaron forced a smile. The subject of caskets left a bad taste in his mouth.

There was a third member of their party sitting in the shadows of the bonfire. He rose from where he sat, adjusted a too-large motorcycle jacket, and slowly approached the others. "Hey, man," he said, offering Aaron a nod of acknowledgment.

"You remember Craig..." Eric said.

Aaron and Craig Lawrence had never been close. Aaron had always found Craig to be a louse, even though he was Mike's best friend. The guy was a pathological liar. He spent his time weaving elaborate tales about how his family was filthy rich despite living in a trailer, how his pop had bought him a brand-new Mustang even though Craig didn't have a license. Aaron didn't get why Mike continued to let Craig hang around, but he put on a smile and gave him a quick embrace anyway.

"Good to see you, man," Aaron told him. "Cool jacket. You ride?"

Craig looked down at his leather as though only then realizing what he was wearing, but his reply came without a hitch of hesitation. "Hell, yeah, dude. I've been on the Harley waiting list for years."

"So, what the hell?" Mike asked, motioning toward a cooler in the dancing shadows of the fire, encouraging the group to follow him back to where he and Craig had been sitting moments before. "What happened to you? You just went MIA?"

Aaron gave the group a shrug before taking a seat on a rotting log. It was like explaining an alien abduction; one minute he was here, the next minute he was somewhere else.

"I got taken into custody," he said.

Mike and Craig both wore matching expressions of disbelief. Eric examined a bottle of the beer Aaron had brought, popped the cap, and held it out to Aaron.

"What does that mean?" Eric asked.

"Turns out you can't be a minor and live on your own," Aaron said, taking the bottle.

"Shit, sorry about your aunt, man," Mike said. "I went to the funeral with my folks. Sad as hell. Seemed like the entire town was there."

"My parents didn't let me go," Eric confessed. "Something about funerals being for adults, not kids."

Aaron's stomach twisted.

"So they just took you?" Craig asked. "Like, kidnapping?"

"I don't know if you could call it kidnapping," Aaron said. "There wasn't anyone to take care of me, I guess. My uncle's folks had passed a few years before, and I'd never met anyone on my aunt's side. I don't know if they're alive or dead or what."

"And your mom?" Mike asked.

Aaron shrugged. "They looked for her, but then they found out she passed away when I was a kid. They didn't tell me much and I didn't really ask. I guess I don't really want to know. I didn't know her anyway, you know? Edie was my mom."

"Shit, that's rough. So where did you end up?" Mike asked.

"Portland."

"Seriously? Always wanted to go there," he said, "never got the chance. Maybe someday."

"It was just weird," Eric said, distracted. "I mean, we at least expected you to be at the funeral. I sent a letter with Mike, but he just brought it back to me, like, 'Sorry, man, Aaron wasn't there.' And Cheri..."

"I ran into her," Aaron said. "Ended up at the shop, needed a new tire, and there she was."

"What was *that* like?" Eric asked.

Aaron didn't say anything for a moment, taking a swig of beer instead. How was it? Strange and transcendent, awkwardly perfect, electric enough to make him feel guilty for the way his heart had clenched and released when her mouth had drifted across his neck.

"It was okay," Aaron said. "I don't think her husband likes me too much."

Eric made a face. "Miles."

"Miles is cool," Mike protested. "You knew him, right?" he asked, raising an eyebrow at Aaron.

"No," Eric answered for him. "He moved here the middle of sophomore year. Either way, I don't know why they got married. She was fine without him."

"Okay, Dear Abby." Mike chuckled, trying to make light of Eric's distrust.

Aaron didn't want to be too quick to judge. If Evangeline had reacted to an old friend the way Cheri had, he would have been reeling with insecurity, too. Every couple had their share of problems. For all he knew, he had compounded one by walking into that shop.

The group fell into momentary silence, listening to the firewood pop, watching it throw sparks into the air. Eventually, Mike spoke again, changing the subject entirely.

"When'd you start on that ink?"

"Seventeen, on a fake ID," Aaron said with a reminiscent smile.

"And what happened there?" he asked, motioning to Aaron's left arm, the scar shining in the firelight like a glossy lick of moisture.

"Accident."

"You got pins in there?"

"Proud owner."

"What happened?"

Aaron looked down at his beer, reflexively peeling away the label. "A drunk guy ran a red. Sixty-mile-per-hour impact."

"Goddamn," Eric murmured. "You're lucky to be alive."

Aaron didn't respond, failed to make eye contact, waited for the sudden roil of anguish within his chest to subside. The memory was still raw, burning like salt ground in an open wound, like a staple shoved beneath a fingernail.

"So you get a second chance at life," Mike said, "and what do you do? Come back to Ironwood. What the hell is up with that?"

"The house."

"The house," Eric repeated. The way he said it was ominous, and the way he looked across the fire at Mike didn't make Aaron feel any better.

"What?" Aaron asked. "This is the second time you've made me feel like I should know something I don't." Aaron had all but forgotten the weird comment Eric had made at Banner's—something about the place being the stuff of legend.

Mike looked impressed. "All that obsession with black magic voodoo hocus-pocus crap and you didn't spill the beans?" he asked Eric. "Outstanding; that must have taken a shitload of self-control."

"Stop," Eric said, not looking at all amused.

"Stop what?" Mike asked. "He's going to find out sooner or later."

“The house out at the end of Old Mill, right?” Craig cut in. “That house is haunted, man.”

Aaron blinked at that, actually had to stop himself from expelling an incredulous laugh at how serious Craig looked.

Craig snorted. “Just because you don’t believe in something doesn’t mean it isn’t real.”

Aaron cracked a helpless grin at that. “Honestly, I—”

“You don’t believe in ghosts,” Craig finished his sentence. “Right?”

Eric chewed on his bottom lip, slowly turning his attention to his old friend, assuring Aaron that it wasn’t a rhetorical question; he was interested in what Aaron had to say.

“You’re living in the wrong house, dude,” Craig assured him. “And you’re hanging out with the wrong guy.” He pointed an accusatory finger at Eric. “He’s been ghost hunting for years.”

“Oh, come on, are you serious?” Aaron blinked at his childhood friend.

Eric shrugged as if to say *guilty as charged*, but he also looked embarrassed, as though his love affair with the paranormal was something he preferred to keep under wraps.

“What’s the organization called?” Craig asked, snapping his fingers, trying to jog his own memory. “Arkansas Ghost Hunter Central or something?”

“Northern Arkansas Paranormal Syndicate,” Eric muttered.

Aaron furrowed his eyebrows. “NAPS?” he asked, desperately trying to keep a straight face.

“Fucking NAPS.” Mike laughed, and Aaron was helpless to keep from joining in.

“Okay,” Eric said begrudgingly, looking like he’d had enough of that particular joke.

“Watch out,” Mike said, holding his hands up and giving them a spooky shake. “The ghosts come out when we’re taking afternoon *naps*.”

“I’m feeling a little tired,” Craig chimed in.

“Are you kidding?” Mike asked. “You can’t sleep, goddamn you. Naps are a trigger.”

“You just curl up, go to sleep, set your EVP recorder on blast.” Craig cackled.

“Great,” Eric murmured, looking down at the ground between his feet. “How about we make fun of black holes or supernovas or some other shit we don’t understand?”

“Oh come off it,” Mike said. “We’re just fucking with you. Besides, Aaron here is the one who has the problem.”

Aaron cleared his throat and tried to look serious, but with both Mike and Craig still snickering, it was tough. “You really think the place is haunted?” he asked after a moment. When Eric failed to respond, Craig cut in.

“Everyone believes it,” Craig said. “You can ask them”—he motioned to the girls a dozen yards away—“or anyone else in town. The old folks avoid Old Mill, while the cool kids drive out there to get drunk and wait to see ghosts in the windows.”

That explained it, then—the reason that asshole kid was hanging around the property, giving him a hell of a time. Maybe that was why the little bastard was breaking in, to convince Aaron that the stories were true.

“I can see it in your face,” Craig said after a moment. “Something happened out there and now you’re putting it together. The wheels are turning.”

“No, just...” Aaron leaned back, rolled his sweating bottle of beer between his palms. “I’ve seen kids hanging out around there. I didn’t know what the hell they wanted, but now it makes more sense.”

“Kids?” Eric asked.

“Yeah, I mean, it may just be one kid or it may be more than one, I’m not really sure. But whoever it is, they’re the reason I ended up at Cheri’s shop. Someone slashed my tire.”

“Ghosts,” Mike said. “Next thing you know, they’ll be stealing your spark plugs and siphoning your gas.”

“You know, for a while the rumor was that you were the one who was haunting the place,” Craig said matter-of-factly.

Aaron released a laugh.

“It’s true,” Craig assured him. “Ask Eric.”

Eric shifted uncomfortably upon the knotty log he was sitting on, cleared his throat, and flashed Aaron an apologetic smile. “You weren’t at the funeral. People started to wonder. Word spread that Edie had died and you were missing. As soon as the rumor was out there, people started

driving by the 'death house' to get an eyeful. And then someone saw something."

"A kid," Craig said. "In a window on the upper floor."

"Then someone else saw it," Eric continued, "followed by a third person, then a fourth. Suddenly people were camping out on the lawn, crossing their fingers that they'd be lucky enough to catch a glimpse of whoever was still occupying the house."

"Hoping to see *you*," Craig clarified. "The story was that you had killed your aunt, and then you had killed yourself, which was why nobody knew where you had gone. And it was weird, man; you had to get the electricity turned on when you got back, right?"

"Sure," Aaron said. "Water, too. The whole place was off the grid."

"Except that people said that every now and then, the lights upstairs would come on, then go out again."

Aaron stared at the three of them, not sure whether to roll his eyes or let the shudder that was crawling across his skin shake him from the inside out.

"Well, I guess I've debunked the story," he finally said.

"How's that?" Mike asked.

"I'm right here; not a ghost. I can't haunt the place if I'm still alive."

"That doesn't mean anything," Craig said. "It just means that *you* aren't the one who people have seen."

"You believe this?" Aaron asked Eric.

Eric shrugged faintly, as if not wanting to talk about it despite his expertise.

"You'll believe, too," Craig assured him. "You stay anywhere near that house for long enough and you'll believe it whether you want to or not."

Seven

Aaron chose not to believe.

Blaming the occurrences back at the house on something paranormal rather than on what they really were—an annoying kid who thought he was being funny—didn't make sense. Aaron liked to think of himself as a logical creature. The simplest, most obvious explanation was the right explanation. If the cops removed the kid from Aaron's property and strange things continued to occur, he'd be willing to consider the supernatural, but until then, this was a clear case of a bored adolescent giving the new guy in town a hell of a time.

Returning home, Aaron sat in his car and stared at the sunken roofline of Uncle Fletcher's shed. He ran the story Craig had related over in his head—the shadowy figure in the upper windows, the lights turning off and on even though the house wasn't hooked up to Arkansas Electric. The broken window and footprints in the dust confirmed Craig's story; there was no doubt that high school kids *did* drive out to the end of Old Mill to screw around. But ghosts? Aaron blamed that on the overactive imaginations of kids with nothing better to do.

Shoving his car door open, Aaron stepped around the front bumper and froze. He saw something shift just beyond the tree line. Squinting in the dark, he strained to make out what it was, and after a few seconds of letting his eyes adjust to the darkness, Aaron saw him: that same punk kid.

Every muscle in his body reflexively tensed. He clenched his teeth as he ducked back into the Tercel and grabbed the camcorder off the passenger's seat. Pointing the camera at the trespasser, this time Aaron made his approach. When the boy disappeared into the overgrowth, Aaron walked faster, nearly breaking into a run, determined to catch up.

"I've got you on camera!" he yelled into the dark. "And I'm calling the cops."

Stopping at the tree line, he glared into the shadows that made it impossible to see. He turned on the camcorder's built-in light in an attempt to illuminate the unlit forest, but it was no use. The light was weak. It lit up six feet in front of him, if that.

"You're trespassing," Aaron said, sure the kid was still within earshot. "And entering someone's house without their permission is a felony. If

you've got anything else on your record you're going straight to juvie, you little shit."

Backtracking to the house, he pulled his phone from his pocket and dialed information. "Ironwood Arkansas...the police department," he murmured into the device. "No, it's not an emergency." He rolled his eyes at the woman on the line and sighed. "Sure, I'll hold."

He fell asleep while waiting for the police to arrive, the flickering blue shadows of the muted TV playing an old Loony Tunes rerun, the Road Runner outsmarting Wile E. Coyote at every turn. He pictured Ryder sitting on the floor in front of the couch, his legs pretzeled in front of him,

the blue glow replaced by warm, gilded sunlight. Ryder turned his head toward the muffled knock on the front door, jumped to his feet, and skipped across the length of the front room to greet whoever was standing on the front porch in the summer heat. A pair of boys came rambling inside. They were older than Ryder, one dressed in a plaid short-sleeved shirt with mother of pearl snaps for buttons, the other carrying a wooden baseball bat in his right hand, an old oiled glove shoved beneath his left arm. Ryder motioned for the boys to follow him upstairs to his room—to Aaron's room, except that Aaron's band and movie posters were gone and his furniture had been replaced. The room looked dated with its vintage striped wallpaper. A collection of tin robots was lined up along the top of a pine dresser.

The boy with the baseball bat and glove took a seat on the edge of the bed while the other stuck his head out the window, staring into the branches of a giant oak just beyond the glass. Dozens of starlings chirped and sang, and Ryder showed the boy how they'd come right up onto the windowsill if you spread birdseed onto the ledge. The plaid-shirted boy smiled in delight as a couple of birds swept in and began to peck at the seed. The baseball player looked less-than-impressed, kneading his glove with impatience, apparently having come over to toss the ball around, not screw around with some girlie birds.

But the baseball player's disinterest waned when, without a hint of warning, Ryder gave the boy at the window a vicious shove. The kid let out a yell as he tumbled forward, his fingers groping for the sill as his sudden shift of weight pulled him out of the room and into the sun. The

baseball player jumped off the bed open-mouthed, but he froze where he stood, too shocked to react.

Ryder slowly turned from the open window to his remaining friend, but it wasn't Ryder any longer. Aaron's son was suddenly older, his dark hair mussed into a rat's nest that stood in wild peaks atop his head. It was the kid—the one who had ducked into the trees not an hour before. He canted his head to the right, and with his ear nearly touching his shoulder, allowed his mouth to split into a gruesome leer that exposed too many teeth.

Aaron's muscles spasmed. His lukewarm beer tumbled to the hardwood floor and rolled beneath the couch, fizzing as it slithered across the wood and collected in the seams between the slats. He winced against the tightness in his chest, pressing his hand to his sternum as he tried to catch his breath in the gloom. What the hell had he just dreamed? He tried to shake it off, angry at himself for imagining Ryder doing something so terrible. But his self-loathing was derailed when a shadow drifted across one of the front windows.

Someone was standing on the porch, a moonlit silhouette creeping across the glass.

Aaron felt like he was choking, unable to swallow against the surprise. He waited for the doorknob to turn as he sat there, his pulse drumming within his head, dulling his ability to think, to plan, to get off the couch and sprint for the kitchen and grab the biggest knife he could find. After what felt like an endless fifteen seconds of doing nothing, logic kicked in.

It was the police.

"Jesus," he said, gathering himself off the couch. He moved across the room, flipped on the overhead light, and unlocked the front door. When it swung open, a jolt of realization hit him square in the chest.

The porch was abandoned.

Aaron was alone.

But he was sure of what he had seen. Someone had been looking through his front window. And yet it seemed as though the trespasser had simply disappeared.

He stepped out onto the covered patio, his gaze wavering to the oaks that lined the driveway, his Tercel parked beneath their branches. He squinted at the leaves that shivered in the 3 a.m. breeze. He swore he saw

someone sitting upon one of the branches, a figure reminiscent of a medieval gargoyle, watching him from a distance. Aaron stepped out on to what had once been the lawn, felt for his phone in his front pocket, and made a slow approach. But the closer he got to the tree, the fainter the shadow became. By the time he was standing directly beneath the oak, it had faded into the canopy completely.

Aaron was alone, left staring at the husk of a house that drew so many to it, a house he never wanted but was his. This was getting ridiculous. He was tempted to booby-trap the place just to catch that little shit in the act. And where the hell were the cops?

He stepped back inside the house, locked the door behind him, and double-checked it to make sure it was secure. But when he turned back to the front room, a yell punched its way out of his throat.

A pile of dead birds sat in the center of the room.

Except that this time there was no way in through the kitchen—the back door was bolted and the new window was latched.

This time, Aaron would have seen the kid if he had run inside the house; he'd only been standing a few hundred feet from the front porch steps.

This time it didn't make any fucking sense.

"I really don't know what to tell you, Mr. Holbrook," the officer explained. "There aren't any signs of a break-in, and, uh, as I said before, I wasn't able to locate anyone outside."

"Of course you weren't," Aaron said. "I called you guys twice before anyone bothered to show up."

The officer frowned at Aaron's tone.

"Sorry," Aaron mumbled. "I'm just a little pissed off. This kid has been terrorizing me since I got here. I wouldn't care so much if he wasn't coming *inside*, you know? I mean—"

"As I mentioned earlier, Mr. Holbrook," the officer cut him off. "There's no sign of a break-in. I can, uh, note it on the police report, but without a positive ID on the youth or anything missing from the house—"

"What about something being *left* in the house?" Aaron asked, motioning to the pile of bird carcasses in the center of the room. "This is the second time."

The officer sighed and readjusted his belt, his walkie blipping on one hip, his gun holstered on the other. "Mr. Holbrook..."

Mr. Holbrook. Every time Officer Helpful said it, Aaron wanted to snap.

"I'm sure you're aware that this particular house has a, uh, reputation."

"How does that even matter?"

"Perhaps you should put in a security system, maybe put up a fence?"

Aaron gritted his teeth at the suggestion.

Sure, he thought, *because those options are cheap.*

"Either way, I'll note the..." He motioned to the pile of feathered bodies with his pen, "...the expired animals. But short of calling wildlife removal, I'm not clear on what you'd, uh..." Officer Helpful hesitated, as if searching for the right way to put it, "...on what you'd like us to do."

"So you can't help me," Aaron said flatly.

"Oh, we can help plenty," the cop assured him. "We just need a little more to work with." He flashed Aaron a smile that was supposed to be friendly, but came off more as an awkward grimace instead.

"What if the kid decides to set my house on fire?" Aaron asked.

"Well, technically that wouldn't be breaking and entering," Officer Helpful explained. "That would be *arson*."

"But he'd be allowed to do it, right? Because you need a little more to work with?"

"I understand your frustration, Mr. Holbrook. I'm sure it's upsetting. But you have to understand," he said, appealing for a little sympathy by holding out his hands. "This place is, uh, this place is ten miles outside of town. It's on the fringes of what we call our jurisdiction. But because you're new and we like to show our residents hospitality, I'll have a, uh, a patrol car cruise up and down Old Mill for you for a few nights, just in case the, uh..." He paused, searching his vocabulary, "...in case the *perpetrator* decides to, uh, cause you any more trouble."

A patrol car.

Aaron nearly rolled his eyes.

A patrol car wouldn't do shit. Like the kid he'd been seeing was stupid enough to openly wander the street on his way to vandalize a property.

"Whatever," Aaron muttered.

“Sir?” The officer peered at him. “Is that a ‘whatever’ as in you want us to patrol the road, or a ‘whatever’ as in you’d rather us not?”

“Whatever,” Aaron repeated. “Do what you want. But do note in my *file* that you were out here and you couldn’t do anything, so that when I drag that little asshole into the station by his ear I don’t get arrested for harassing a minor.”

“Uh...” Officer Helpful frowned at his pad of paper, not sure how to respond to that. “I’m not sure I’d suggest that plan of action. Maybe just talk to him.” He cleared his throat. “From a safe distance, of course.”

“Of course,” Aaron echoed.

“And just, uh, just call in any new occurrences.”

“So you can note them in my file?”

The officer smacked his lips and shoved his pad into the back pocket of his slacks. “That’s right,” he said. “It all goes in the file.”

Aaron moved across the room and opened the front door for Officer Helpful, waiting for him to take his leave.

“You have a good rest of your night, now,” the cop told him.

“Sure,” Aaron said, and closed the door before the officer could make it down the front porch steps.

By the time the cruiser crunched down the gravel driveway, Aaron was grabbing a beer from the fridge. Tomorrow he’d stop at Banner’s for more, if not for something more substantial. But until then, he’d quench his thirst, pop an Ativan, and try to get some sleep.

The picture on the camcorder’s tiny screen tilted and swayed. Aaron’s breathing sounded raspy and disturbed as the camera jerked from one point of reference to the next. There was a brief shot of Aaron’s sneakers as he moved across the kitchen, down the hall, and into the living room, pausing to pull open the front door before stepping onto the porch.

“I can’t fucking believe this,” he said, his voice aggravated, the front lawn unrolling along the bottom of the camcorder’s screen. “I swear to God, if I see that kid again...”

The camera swung wide, bringing the Tercel into view. A few starlings chirped overhead as if disturbed by the angry man beneath the canopy of branches. Aaron stepped around the car to bring the driver’s side into

view, capturing a freshly shattered window with the device, safety glass sparkling in the early morning sun.

The camcorder scanned the perimeter of distant trees, searching for signs of the kid—the perpetrator, as Officer Helpful would have called him—but there was no one there.

Aaron turned the camera on himself.

“Ghosts?” He squinted against the light. “Bullshit.”

He lowered the camera, staring at the damage to his vehicle, taking deep, steady breaths to keep from losing it completely. He gritted his teeth as he circled the car, searching for additional damage—maybe the vandal had gone out of his way to key his doors and break out his headlights. When Aaron was satisfied that the window was the only new development in his world of car trouble, he sighed and switched off the camera; it was enough documentation for his *file*.

He dismissed the idea of taking the car back to Vaughn’s. He wanted to see Cheri again, but if Miles saw him so soon he’d flip his lid. That, and Aaron wasn’t in the mood to drop another hundred bucks on car maintenance. This was a job for the hardware store—nothing a bit of plastic sheeting and duct tape couldn’t fix. And while he was in town picking up more supplies, he’d drop by Officer Helpful’s office and give him an eyeful of the “new occurrence.”

“Goddamnit,” he murmured, pulling his car keys from the pocket of his jeans, patting his back pocket to make sure he had his wallet before setting out for town. Grinding gravel beneath the soles of his shoes, he stepped around the driver’s side of the Toyota once more, but this time his gaze didn’t stop on the shattered window. His heart hitched and stuttered within the cage of his ribs as he stared at the side of the car.

In crooked, childlike lettering, a name was scrawled into the scrim of dirt clinging to the door—a name that hadn’t been there a minute before.

Feeling as though his knees were about to give out, he pressed a hand against the roof and shut his eyes tight, willing the writing away.

But the name was still there when he looked again.

I RYDER.

His hands trembled.

His eyes went glassy at the sight of it.

That name was plain as day, scribbled across the paint of his driver-side door.

Eight

Hazel Murphy's attention wavered from the table of flowers ahead of her and across the hardware store's greenhouse. She recognized the man as soon as she saw him; Edie Holbrook's nephew was hard to miss. His skin glowed green from across the arboretum, tinted by sun that dappled through the shade tarp stretched tight overhead. Hazel watched him from a distance, not the least bit worried of drawing attention to herself. Men like him didn't notice old bats like her. She was quite sure that the only time Aaron would regard her in any sense was when he needed a refill on his coffee or to ask for an extra side of toast.

Losing sight of him when he turned the corner into an aisle of peat moss and wood chips, Hazel looked down to the daisies and petunias that stretched out before her like a colorful carpet—red and white, just like the ones she'd planted around the Lumberjack's feet. She had considered talking to Aaron during his early morning visit to the Blue Ox but had thought better of it. Besides, Harold had been there; she would have had to explain herself. And if she was even the least bit right about that old house at the end of Old Mill Road, keeping her distance from Edie's boy would serve Hazel well.

Hazel Murphy and Edie Holbrook—Edie Bell before she and Fletcher had tied the knot—had been close as girls. They sat next to each other in class from the first grade all the way through junior high, ate lunch together at the outdoor picnic tables when the weather was nice, and giggled about boys while climbing on the monkey bars. Hazel and Edie spent equal time at each other's houses, at least before the Bells decided to move into the old relic of a house at the end of Old Mill.

Once that happened, Hazel was forever explaining that she couldn't visit Edie because it was too far outside of town; her parents didn't want to make the drive. But distance had nothing to do with it. There was talk about the Bells moving into that old house as soon as they started packing up their things; that was when Hazel's parents made it clear that she was forbidden to visit her closest friend. Edie was welcome to come over whenever she wanted, but Hazel wouldn't ever set foot in Edie's home.

Taking slow, deliberate steps across the greenhouse to where Aaron had disappeared, Hazel paused just shy of a row of fruit saplings. He had a

few flowering bushes set on the flat bed of his cart—hydrangeas, which had been Edie's favorite. Hazel imagined Edie's inked-up nephew slaving over that cursed house, a house she was sure had been devastated by standing empty for so many years.

After Edie had passed, a few of the women from their congregation had taken it upon themselves to clean the house of any perishables before securing the place against intruders. Hazel and Edie had grown apart by then, but that wasn't why Hazel hadn't offered to help clean out her old friend's home. Even in her mid-thirties, she had remained wary of that house, and after Edie died, she was convinced that her father's kooky stories about curses and ghosts had been truer than she had thought.

Hazel hadn't been surprised to learn that, less than a few months after Edie's death, local kids had broken a window and were wandering inside the place. All the kids believed the house was haunted; only a few of the adults suspected the tales to be true. Hazel Murphy was one of the believers, but she'd never said as much. The last thing she needed was to be known as the batty old superstitious diner waitress.

Regardless of the stories, her heart ached at the thought of keeping her distance from Aaron. The least she could do for Edie was to reach out to him, offer him a homemade meal and a clean place to sleep while he was fixing up the house. But after what happened to Edie, she couldn't allow herself to get close, couldn't permit that man anywhere near her home. She had her own family to worry about.

Hazel frowned, not liking the look of his sunken eyes. He seemed jittery, agitated, which was yet another reason she didn't dare approach. She didn't like judging books by their covers, but there was something distinctly wrong with the way Aaron appeared. He radiated a fractured sort of dismay, an electric anxiety that reminded her of the way Miranda had been just before she had taken her own life.

Aaron glanced up at her from his cart and she offered him a faint smile, holding a potted daisy plant to her chest. He gave her a half-hearted smile in return and continued loading peat moss and topsoil onto his cart. Hazel quietly turned away and ducked out of the aisle. She was sure she'd see him again; she could only hope that the terrible stories her father had told her as a girl were wrong. For Edie's sake, she prayed that her father had made up all those crazy stories.

—

Aaron sat on the front porch step, his arms wound around his knees, a bottle of Jack Daniel's half-empty at his feet. He had slipped up, tumbled down the rabbit hole, unable to look away from his son's scribbled name etched into his car door, unable to fathom how it had gotten there, how it was possible.

It's im-fucking-possible.

He took another swig of alcohol, wiped his mouth against his wrist and squinted through the midday sun, the heat intensifying the spinning inside his head.

He knew it was stupid before he dug his phone out of his pocket, knew it was a mistake before he scrolled through his contacts, stopped on *Evan* for Evangeline, and pressed SEND. He knew it was a really bad fucking idea, but he pressed the phone to his ear and waited for the call to connect because he had to tell her.

Evangeline had to know.

"Hello?"

Her voice made his heart lurch. He squeezed his eyes shut, felt ready to burst into a fit of incoherent sobs. He wanted to beg her: *Please stop this. Let's start over. Let's be the way we were before any of this happened, before there was anything beyond the two of us.* But that was the problem—that was *his* problem; he couldn't let go, couldn't move on. He could beg all he wanted, but when it came down to it, he was the one who was stuck. The name carved into his door proved it. The alcohol that coursed through his veins sealed the deal.

"Aaron?" She sounded unsure of herself.

He was sure she could hear him breathing as he considered hanging up before words had a chance to claw their way from inside his throat, but he simply sat there with the phone glued to his ear, unable to make a decision, unable to move.

"I'm in Arkansas," he finally told her, his tongue tripping over his home state.

There was a long silence on her end, but she eventually spoke.

"You're drunk."

"I know." He replied quickly, sure she was on the verge of insisting he call her back when he was sober.

Call me when I can't smell you through the phone, Aaron. Get yourself together. Don't call me like this again.

"But it's because there's this thing..." he said.

Again, a long silence from two thousand miles away.

"A *thing*," she finally replied.

"Yes," he said, relieved that she understood. "I just...Ryder's name, Evan. It's here."

"What?" She sounded less than amused.

"On my door. Someone wrote it."

"Someone wrote Ryder's name on your door," she said steadily. "On the house door?"

"The car."

"Someone wrote his name on the car door."

"Except it wasn't there before," Aaron explained. "I walked around the car and all I saw was the window and I checked twice because of the asshole kid, he won't leave me alone and he slashed my tire, which cost me like two hundred bucks, so I was sure that maybe he—But that...it isn't important."

He shook his head, trying to get his story straight. "It wasn't there, and then it was there, and people are telling me this house is haunted and I thought that maybe, I don't know, I just..."

He struggled for words, not sure what he was trying to say, suddenly realizing just how bad an idea calling her had been.

"You hallucinated something—" Evan began.

"No." Aaron cut her off, but Evan wasn't swayed.

"You *hallucinated* something," she repeated, "and then you proceeded to get drunk and call me to, what, suggest Ryder is there with you? Do you know how sick that is, Aaron? Do you know how crazy you sound?"

"But you believe in that stuff," Aaron reminded her.

He remembered how excited Evangeline would get when her favorite show came on Friday nights—a ghost hunting show that Aaron teased her for watching, making fun of the "hunters" with their bulging gym-rat muscles and their tight bedazzled T-shirts. Evangeline even joined in on the teasing once in a while, mocking the TV screen during the more ridiculous parts. But she never gave it up, faithfully popping her popcorn and pouring herself a glass of red wine ten minutes before the start of the

show. When Aaron asked her what she saw in it, why she subjected herself to hours' worth of guys sneaking through dark hallways and rickety buildings, she'd shrug her shoulders and offer him an abashed sort of smile—a little embarrassed by her guilty pleasure, but not embarrassed enough to give it up. She was a true believer, putting her faith in the idea of an afterlife.

Back then, Aaron had thought her infatuation cute, never stopping to consider “what if.” Now he wondered whether his refusal to believe had to do with Evangeline's inability to continue loving him. Maybe if he had believed, they would have stayed together; they would have fought through the grief, bonded by the unified hope that their little boy—while gone from this earth—was still out there somewhere, that it was only a matter of time before they were together again.

But now that he had evidence with enough power to convince him, Evan was snorting at him on the other end of the line. He couldn't see her, but he knew she was rolling her eyes, imagined her lips going tight over her teeth.

“What if it is him?” Aaron asked after a moment, his voice tapering off. “What if he's here? I don't know why he'd be here, but what if he is?”

“I don't think you should call me anymore,” Evangeline finally said.

“I'm sorry,” Aaron murmured. “I'll call back when I'm...not like this. It was stupid, I just got scared. I needed to tell you.”

“Aaron?”

“Yes?”

Aaron blinked, suddenly scared by her steady tone.

“I don't think you should call me anymore,” she told him again, but her voice cracked this time.

“What?”

He swallowed the spit that had collected in his mouth. It tasted foul, metallic, like iron or blood.

“But I thought we were going to try to—”

“Stop,” she said, that single word trembling like a tree in autumn wind. “Please just stop. I can't do this anymore, Aaron. I can't live like this, okay?”

Aaron fell into what felt like a suffocating silence. He was drowning in it, struggling to find the right words to say so frantically that all they

did was choke off his air. His heart somersaulted inside his chest, pinballing against his ribs. He suddenly felt like he was going to throw up and scream all at once.

“But I’m fixing it,” he managed to whisper. “I’ve been doing better, Evan, I just need a little more time.”

He could hear her sniffing on the end of the line.

She was cutting him off just as he was coming into the clear.

She was abandoning him when he’d finally come to terms with the fact that she was right, that he needed help, that he couldn’t continue to live the way he’d been living—with the booze and the grief and the pills and the pain.

“I can’t do this without you,” he said, his words warbling with emotion. “I need you, Evan. Please just give me a few more months; just let me get back to Portland. I’ll keep seeing Doctor Jandreau for as long as you want...*forever* if you want.”

Her lack of response speared him through the heart. He was gripping the phone so viciously, pressing it so hard against his face that his ear was starting to ache.

“Evan?” he whispered. “Say something. Just don’t say you—”

“I have to go.”

He squeezed his eyes shut.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly. “I just can’t.”

When she disconnected the call, he continued to hold it to his ear, praying that she was still there, waiting for her to change her mind. But there was only silence.

Evangeline was gone.

For a moment Aaron felt like he was dying. He doubled over against the pain in his chest, his heart petrifying like a stone. Anxiety washed over him in a crippling rush, the same anxiety that, back in Portland, caused him to nearly dial 911 over a dozen times, sure that his heart was about to explode, that his aorta would give beneath his skyrocketing blood pressure, that it would bisect and he’d bleed out and it would take a week for anyone to find him. Hell, out here it could be *months*, his dead body lying out on the lawn, putrefying in the sun. The fact that he’d seen things like that actually happen didn’t help. The guy with the bisected aorta died in the ambulance on the way to Legacy Good Samaritan. Countless heart

attack victims had expired, strapped to a gurney while Aaron and Cooper defibbed and CPR'd. They had walked into an apartment where a woman had passed away in her bed weeks before. They had responded to a call where the body of a suicide had literally liquefied into a lake of carnage; he and Cooper had to stumble out of the bathroom and call for hazmat cleanup.

Aaron stared at the tangle of dead hydrangea bushes flanking the porch's balustrade, twisted and dry like skeleton arms. He considered going inside, swallowing the rest of his pills, washing them down with whiskey, and waiting for the final fade to black. He thought about the gun he'd shoved beneath his old bed upstairs, wondered how it would feel to blow a hole through the back of his own skull.

But instead of stumbling headlong into his typical reaction of numbing himself until he couldn't feel a single thing, he shoved himself off the porch steps and grabbed the shovel that was propped against the stairs. When he'd woken that morning, he had been determined to clear the bushes from the front of the house like a gravedigger clearing the dead, but he'd been derailed by his shattered window, by a collection of six letters etched into his paint. Now, fueled by newfound rage, he sank the spade into the soil at the base of one of Edie's bushes and jammed it up to its hilt with a downward stomp, but as he dug he realized the irony of it all. He had come here to work out his issues, and the only reason he had for working out his issues was to win back his wife. Now she didn't want to talk to him anymore, he was stuck here in Ironwood, and something was happening—something he couldn't explain.

He stumbled backward, pulled his arm back, and gave the shovel a javelin throw into the yard, spun around, and grabbed the bottle of Jack Daniel's from the porch step, only to launch it at the balustrade. The bottle hit the wood with a hollow thunk and fell into the bushes that needed digging up. Aaron turned away from the house, his hands buried in his hair. He walked down the driveway, thinking that maybe a few minutes of reflection would help him get his head on straight, but something about putting that house to his back only made him feel more volatile.

Reaching the end of the driveway, he turned to look back at his childhood home, the place that had effectively ruined him, that had cursed him to a life surrounded by death.

His hands balled into fists.

His lungs filled with air.

Standing on the cracked pavement of Old Mill Road, Aaron opened his mouth and let out an anguished yell.

He screamed at that fucking house, willing it back into hell. But rather than sinking into the ground, it stood steadfast in place.

Aaron stared at it for a long while, as if challenging it to do its worst. And then his eyes slid shut, he pulled in a steadying breath, and he walked up the driveway again. There was still hope—that's what Doc Jandreau had said.

There's always hope, as long as you keep hoping.

Nine

The baseball boy twisted where he stood, moving painfully slow as he fell into a run, but Aaron was quick. Before the kid was able to bolt out of the room, Aaron snatched the abandoned baseball bat beside the bed, reached out with his free hand to catch the boy by the back of the shirt, and gave him a stern backward yank. The baseball player released a startled yell and threw his weight forward, desperate to escape Aaron's grasp, stretching his arms outward, fingers groping the edge of the door. He was trying to drag himself out of the room despite his jersey being pulled impossibly tight against his chest.

His struggle was cut short when Aaron reeled back and brought the wooden baseball bat down on top of the boy's head.

The kid let out a shout, his grip reflexively releasing the doorframe, his arms folding across the top of his head. Aaron didn't hesitate. He brought the bat down again and again, both hands choking up on the grip. The baseball player's screams shifted from terrified to garbled, guttural, until he finally went quiet, nothing but the wet slap of wood against hopelessly traumatized flesh.

Aaron stepped back, wiping a forearm across the blood-spattered curve of his cheek. A woman yelled up from the first floor. Edie surfaced from the hallway that led into the kitchen, her head upturned, spotting her nephew as she ran up the stairs. Aaron's fingers twitched against the bat and his

muscles spasmed; his eyes shot open, staring into the darkness of his bedroom.

He covered his face, rolled onto his side, and swiped a prescription bottle off the bedside table with a sweep of the hand. Shaking three yellow tabs into his palm, he tossed them back and washed them down with a swig of flat beer. And then he faced the wall, pulled the pillow over his head, and squeezed his eyes shut once more.

He spent the next day aimlessly floating from one room to another. One minute he was collapsed on his bed, the next he was sitting at the top of the stairs. He lay on the couch and stared up at the ceiling, wondering how much a house alarm would set him back, how long it would take to install; his muscles aching from a frenzy of the previous day's work.

In his anger, he had replaced every single one of those goddamn hydrangea bushes, pretending that every shovelful of dirt had been a shovel closer to digging his own grave. After the bushes were planted, he'd replaced the bug netting on both the front and back porch and scrubbed the peeling floor planks until his back lower back screamed bloody murder. Yesterday, he had relished the pain. The physical ache had been a welcome change to the one deep within his chest. Today, the wrenching of his muscles was annoying, grounding him from doing much of anything but lounging around.

He lazed out on the weedy lawn and stared up at the clouds, dialed Cooper's number a half dozen times but failed to press SEND, deciding he wasn't up for listening to his best friend launch into his typical *that's what you get for living out in the middle of nowhere* spiel when it came to the asshole kid, the birds, the cops who refused to lift a finger; not wanting to hear about how stupid it was for him to have called Evangeline the way he had. He knew it had been a mistake.

Blame it on temporary insanity.

Unable to clear his head, he locked up the house and walked down the driveway, his worn-out Asics pounding the cracked pavement of winding, woodland streets. It took him nearly twenty minutes to reach his closest neighbor—a beaten-down house that was surely abandoned despite the crap littering the ground. Crabgrass and thistle swept across the bottoms of the windows in the light summer breeze, and the driveway showed no signs of recent use. A kid had lived there when Aaron was still in elementary school, but they had never been friends. Edie hadn't liked those neighbors because they didn't take care of their property. Trash had lined the street just beyond their house and it made her feel like all the effort she put into making their house nice was for nothing. It didn't matter that the neighbors were a good mile away. Aaron stopped just shy of the weeded driveway and looked up at the dilapidated tragedy, wondering if someone was squatting within those run-down walls, wondering if that fucking kid was staring back at him from behind rotting curtains, his mouth curled up in that ugly leer.

Aaron stopped walking after another mile. He'd gone far enough to satisfy his curiosity, to reassure himself that he was very much alone on that stretch of road. The few houses that peppered the ten miles between

his place and the intersection that led to Ironwood proper had been allowed to wither away. They were vandalized, beaten down by the weather, overgrown by the wild. The curving pavement of the dead-end street was nothing but a finger of desolation jutting into the hickories and oaks.

Arriving back home, Aaron considered calling Mike and Eric for an impromptu barbecue—maybe he'd go out on a limb and invite Cheri and her overly intimidating husband over for burgers and brews. They'd have a reunion that was long overdue.

No, that would be a little too weird. He didn't want Miles knowing where he lived, though he had a feeling the guy already knew. Aaron didn't want to deal with it; hell, he didn't have enough luck to press. But he also couldn't sit out here alone, not today, not after his meltdown the day before. He was slipping farther down the rabbit hole by the minute, having *thrown* himself off the wagon rather than casually tumbling off. Not more than a few months ago, he wouldn't have thought twice about giving up, but Aaron wasn't ready to surrender yet. He had to finish what he started, if not for Evangeline than for Edie, for Cooper, for himself.

Turning his cell phone over and over again in his hands, he finally gave in and dialed Eric's number. Maybe once the house was done he'd be ready for a big shindig, but one person would be enough company for now.

Eric cackled as Aaron battled the flames with a metal spatula. He looked like a fencer, whapping at the fire, trying to cut it down to size while shielding his eyebrows with his left arm.

"Save them!" Eric pleaded from the back porch. "For the love of God, save the beef!"

Aaron managed to salvage a couple of patties at the cost of choking on lungs full of smoke.

"Ah, the smell of summer," Eric mused.

Aaron ascended the steps and presented a paper plate of barely rescued hamburger meat.

"Nothing like throwing some cow into a towering inferno, huh? Now, *this* is what I call leisure."

“Next time I’ll hit up a fast-food joint before I invite you over,” Aaron said. “We can avoid this mess entirely.”

“Next time?” Eric raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know...” He balanced a particularly charred patty on the end of the spatula for inspection. “I may not survive *this* time.”

“How about you shut up and make yourself useful? I left some stuff on the counter. Bring it out here, would you?”

“Is it some kind of magical make-my-burger-unburn-itself condiment?” Eric asked, rising from his seat.

“Yeah,” Aaron said, “it’s called ketchup.”

Eric entered the kitchen through the open back porch door. “Oh, foolish one,” he said, raising his voice so Aaron could hear him. “You overestimate the power of the tomato.”

He stepped around the kitchen counter and peered into a familiar bag, his family surname emblazoned across thin brown plastic. He hated working at Banner’s. Hell, if the Superette hadn’t gone under, he would have shopped there just to give his father’s business a healthy dose of competition. He resented his pop, condemned both his father and mother for calling on him after his dad’s accident. Eric had been out in Little Rock, knee-deep in business classes at UALR, working part-time at a locally owned coffee shop just shy of the college campus. It hadn’t been much of a job but he had liked it; the easy atmosphere, his peers coming in off the street in dire need of caffeine, their arms weighed down with books they paid a fortune for and would sell back to the university for pennies on the dollar. Eric had been over the moon when he had put Ironwood in his rearview mirror, his optimism replaced by despondency upon his return. It had felt more like a prison sentence than a homecoming. Sometimes, it still did.

Eric grabbed the plastic bag off the counter, raised an eyebrow at an empty whiskey bottle sitting in the sink, and turned to head back outside. He paused when his gaze snagged on a camcorder and a book sitting at the edge of the old farmhouse table. It was the same table he and Aaron used to play War on when it was too hot to go outside, the same table they had sat around when Aaron’s uncle Fletcher had busted them trying to play poker, only to teach them the rules when Edie’s back was turned.

Eric took a single step toward the table, the wood top dried by decades of neglect, a large fissure running through the center of parched pine. He narrowed his eyes, gingerly moving the camera aside to read the title of the book beneath it. *Coping with Grief*. Eric frowned at it, letting his fingers linger upon the cover before pulling his hand away with a start.

“Did you get lost or what?” Aaron called from outside.

Eric stepped away from the table, turned where he stood, and stepped out onto the small screened-in back patio with bag in hand. Aaron sat at a small table just within the porch’s netting, building himself a sad-looking burger. Eric settled back into his seat, placed the bag in his lap, and emptied it item by item.

“Ketchup.”

He placed a bottle of Heinz at the edge of the table.

“Mustard. Mayo. What’s up with the camcorder; making a sex tape?”

Aaron smirked at the suggestion and grabbed the ketchup, twisting the cap off before working on the protective seal beneath it. “Just eat your burger,” he murmured.

Eric started on the construction of his own char-grilled nightmare. “Seriously, though,” he said, reaching for a hamburger bun. “What’s it for?”

“Documentation.”

“Gee, you think so?” Eric shot his friend a look from across the table. “Documentation of *what*? You want to join NAPS?”

He had meant it as a joke at his own expense, but his suggestion seemed to give Aaron pause, as though he was seriously considering the possibility. Eric perked, wondering if something had happened to turn Aaron’s skepticism of the paranormal into belief, but bringing it up meant dredging up the past; it meant possibly implicating himself as one of the numerous trespassers who had snuck in and out of Edie’s broken kitchen window. Not wanting to piss Aaron off with that tidbit of information, Eric dropped a leaf of lettuce onto his bun and crushed it with a disk of grilled meat instead.

After a moment of silence, Aaron lifted his shoulders and shrugged. “I saw someone on the porch the other night,” he said. “Just standing there, like they were considering coming inside.”

Eric blinked at the news.

"I fell asleep on the couch. I thought it was the cops, but whoever it was disappeared by the time I set foot on the lawn."

"Wait, you called the cops?"

Aaron didn't reply.

"You think it's the same asshole kid who's been screwing with your car?"

"Possibly."

"What did the cops say?"

"In a nutshell? To enjoy being harassed, because they couldn't do shit about it."

Eric scoffed. "Figures. You need to get yourself armed and alarmed, man."

"I've got a gun," Aaron said. "Maybe I should use it."

Eric raised an eyebrow at that.

"I checked the web for alarm systems earlier," Aaron continued.

"You get Internet out here?"

Aaron rolled his eyes at the suggestion. "I hardly get cell phone service out here. I looked around on my phone while I was in town. For this size house, I'm looking at a grand, minimum. I can't afford that, not with the amount of work this place needs. And I don't know what the hell I'd do with it even if I did get one. I have no idea how to install something like that; the wiring is probably all outdated anyway."

"So you're going to put the culprits on YouTube instead?"

Aaron gave him a petulant smile.

"Hey," Eric lifted his hands in surrender. "I'm just saying, a camcorder isn't going to stop a thief unless you chuck it at their head, and even then, you'd better hope you've got good aim. Though, I guess if you set it up on a windowsill or something, you could at least get a positive ID on who's actually doing the vandalizing. Maybe the cops would do something then. Or maybe it's a ghost..."

"Yeah. Right." Aaron's face went sour. "I think it's the same kid time and time again. And then there was this boy in town, the same damn kid, I swear. I went to Bennie's Burgers like you suggested..."

"Yeah?" Eric straightened in his chair. "Did you have their bacon cheeseburger?"

"I did."

“And did it blow your mind?”

“It was pretty good.”

“*Pretty good? Dude...*” Eric gave him a scolding look. “It’s the best bacon cheeseburger I’ve had in my entire life, and I’ve had a *lot* of bacon cheeseburgers. Bennie’s is, like, the only good thing about this entire town. We should rename Ironwood in honor of Bennie’s achievement. Benniewood. Burgerwood. Bacon-Cheeseburg, Arkansas.”

Aaron cracked a grin as he chewed on the antithesis of Bennie’s creation, and Eric peered down at his own sandwich and frowned.

“Anyway,” Eric said, “continue. You went to Bennie’s Burgers...”

“I went to Bennie’s Burgers like you suggested, and while I’m sitting at one of their outdoor tables I look across the street at the high school...”

“The high school,” Eric said flatly. “Weird, right?”

“What happened to it, anyway?” Aaron asked. “Whose bright idea was it to consolidate at the elementary school instead of moving the little kids to a bigger building?”

“There was a fire,” Eric said. “It happened the year after we graduated. Well, we as in Cheri and me. I don’t know if you ended up graduating in ninety-seven or not.” Aaron gave him a nod. “Anyway, I wasn’t here for the insanity of the whole thing—I was already out in Little Rock—but from what Craig says, someone planted a pipe bomb in the cafeteria, blew out half a cinderblock wall.”

“Holy shit.”

“Nobody was in there when it happened except some cafeteria workers, and they were too far away to get anything but seriously freaked out. I guess the timer was rigged wrong, but yeah, someone basically tried to blow up the fucking school. They never figured out who it was, and after it happened there was just this air of, like, having avoided fate or something. You know, like those *Final Destination* movies? Nobody wanted to go back in there, and it would have cost an arm and a leg to repair the damage, so they just moved everyone to the elementary school and called it good.”

“That’s insane.” Aaron took another swig of beer. “But kids wander around in there?”

Eric shrugged. “We would have, wouldn’t we?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“It’s still creepy, though. I mean, I’ve seen a few people hanging around the building after dark, but I think most of them avoid going inside. It’s that whole escaped-fate feeling. What if the Grim Reaper is in there, patiently waiting for his body count?”

“That sounds like some grade-A necromancy right there,” Aaron said, a ghost of an amused smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “You always did believe in the weirdest shit.”

Eric shrugged and leaned back in his seat. It was true, he was a junkie when it came to conspiracy theories. He’d probably spent years of his life in front of the TV, watching documentaries on ghosts and aliens and government cover-ups. Living in a place like Boone County, you took your thrills any way you could. That stuff made the world a more interesting place, and in backwoods like this, you either kept your mind engaged or your brain turned to sludge.

“Regardless,” Aaron said after a moment. “I saw a kid in there.”

“Inside the high school?”

Aaron nodded. “He was wandering past the busted-out front windows, noticed me looking at him, made some weird gesture with his hands, and took off.”

Eric laughed. “A *weird gesture*? You mean he flipped you the bird?”

“It wasn’t like that,” Aaron said. “He hooked his thumbs together and, like, flapped his hands like wings. Either way, I’m positive it was the same kid who’s been screwing with my car.”

“Maybe it is,” Eric said. “But that’s a pretty big assumption.”

“It’s not an assumption.”

“Why? How do you know for sure?”

Aaron shrugged, staring down at his plate.

“Everyone in town knows who you are. They know you’re Edie’s nephew and that you’re living out in the creepy-ass house at the end of Old Mill. People are curious, *especially* the kids. I wouldn’t be surprised if half of the Warrior Army has driven out here in the dead of night.”

“Yeah,” Aaron murmured, distant.

“And quite frankly,” Eric continued, “I’d be careful if I were you.”

“What?” Aaron was caught off-guard by the impromptu warning.

“These are the fucking Ozarks, man. You know there are all kinds of weirdos out here. This place is in the boonies of the boonies. It’s on a road

that's, like, virtually abandoned. No neighbors, too much property to effectively check for freaks."

"What are you trying to do," Aaron asked, "scare the hell out of me?"

"I'm just saying. I don't know how a kid, especially a younger one, would get out here from the center of town. It's more than a ten-mile drive, so it isn't like he could walk it."

"So you're saying I'm imagining things?"

"Not at all." Eric threw his head back and drained his beer. "I'm saying that these weirdos come out to places like this. These are some of the last unspoiled pieces of North American land. What if the kid actually *lives* in the forest just beyond this place? What if you're dealing with a whole family of ravenous cannibals or something?"

"Okay, stop." Aaron looked genuinely freaked out, and Eric's enthusiasm for the strange and unusual wasn't helping. Aaron peered at his burger, then finished it off in a couple of bites.

"Sorry, man," Eric said, deciding to dismiss the whole idea. "You're right, it's probably just some stupid kid. He probably hitched a ride or something. Maybe he has a four-wheeler. Who knows?" He shrugged at his own question. "Hell, who cares? All I know is that if someone is showing up on your porch, you need to have that gun of yours at arm's length. If I were you, I'd stuff it into the waistband of my jeans and Dirty Harry it from now on. If someone is genuinely screwing with you, going out of their way to come out here and scare you, stare through your windows, vandalize your car, there's something seriously wrong with them. Like, *mentally*. That isn't what normal people do."

"You aren't helping," Aaron said.

"I know," Eric said, holding up his hands once again. "I'm sorry. I just think you need to be careful. Don't isolate yourself out here."

Aaron nodded faintly.

"I'm serious. You quarantine yourself out in the middle of nowhere and you're liable to go nuts."

"I hear you," Aaron reassured him, but he was less than convincing, and that made Eric nervous. There was something about the way Aaron was willing to accept what was happening to him, his lack of fight, the gun...something about the whole thing didn't sit right.

"Hey," he said, "are you okay?"

Aaron's expression wavered slightly, but a second later he was putting on a brave face and nodding his head. "Sure, why?"

"Just checking." Eric rubbed the back of his neck. "You a whiskey man?"

"What?" Aaron actually looked defensive for a second, confirming Eric's suspicion. Aaron had thrown back more than half a dozen beers out at Stonehenge and still walked a straight line back to his car. If Eric had tried that same trick, he would have stumbled headlong into Bull Shoals Lake.

"I saw the bottle in the sink," Eric told him.

"Oh." Aaron leaned back in his chair, began to construct another sandwich. "I found that outside," he said. "Figured I'd keep the bottle for ___"

Their conversation came to an abrupt halt when a starling swooped across the backyard and kamikazeed into the brand-new kitchen window. Aaron and Eric stared at the thing as it weakly flapped its wings twice and died, its neck bent at an impossible angle. But before Aaron could say a word, there was another bang, this time from the front of the house, far louder than the first.

Aaron dropped his half-eaten second burger onto his plate and twisted in his seat.

"What the hell was that?" Eric asked, looking about as startled as Aaron felt.

Aaron slowly shook his head to say he didn't know. The thud that had come from the front of the house had sounded heavy, two weighty knocks, as though someone had thrown a sack of potatoes against his door and let it drop to the porch—*bang, thump*. Aaron peered at the door as he approached it, Eric fast on his heels. What could it be this time? A bag of maggoty meat? An assault of rotten eggs? A sack of flaming shit care of Ironwood's chummiest adolescent?

Welcome to the neighborhood, asshole.

He unlocked the door, jerked the thing open.

Lying on his doorstep was the carcass of the biggest crow Aaron had ever seen. The bug netting that he'd repaired was torn, only a minor detail

compared to the swath of gore that now decorated the whitewash along the side of the door.

“Holy shit,” Eric muttered as he stood with his arms at his sides, blinking at the dead animal where Aaron’s welcome mat should have been. The thing was massive. Eric assumed it had a wingspan of at least four or five feet.

“Is it dead?” Eric finally asked.

Aaron stood next to him, glowering at the thing.

“Obviously.”

“I don’t know, man, it’s a crow. These things are like Necronomicons. Nudge it.”

“With what?”

“Your shoe, man. Just give it a kick.”

Aaron’s face twisted in distaste. “I’m not kicking it.”

“I thought you said it’s dead,” Eric countered. “Think you’re going to hurt its feelings?”

“If it isn’t dead, I’ll nudge it and it’ll tear my face off.”

Eric cracked a grin at that, imagining Aaron with a face full of bird, then cleared his throat and looked serious again. “So get a stick or something. If it moves, you can smack it.”

Aaron looked horrified.

“Baseball is America’s pastime,” Eric said. Something about that made Aaron’s face twist in alarm. “What, since when do you not like baseball?” he asked. “Besides, what’re you going to do, leave it on your doorstep? What if it starts rotting? Its eyes will go first. It’ll get all bloated and creepy, the flies will come...”

Aaron grimaced and slowly extended his foot, the tip of his sneaker tapping one of the crows clenched feet. The thing didn’t move.

“I told you, it’s dead,” Aaron said, pulling his leg away. “It flew right through the netting, which I *just* replaced.”

“Well.” Eric crossed his arms over his chest in contemplation, staring at the splat of gore next to the door, his eyebrows furrowed. “That’s pretty fucked up; maybe he doesn’t like home improvement?”

“This giant fucking thing slams into the front of my house a few seconds after a starling tries to fly through the kitchen window,” Aaron

murmured, as if trying to put it together.

“Starlings are stupid birds,” Eric assured him.

“That isn’t the point. You know about all this stuff. Does it make sense to you?”

Eric considered it, then shook his head. “No. Starlings may be stupid, but crows are smart. They don’t fly into windows or run into houses.” He gave his friend a stern look. “You didn’t do anything to piss them off, did you?”

“What? To piss off the *crows*?”

“Crows hold grudges,” Eric said matter-of-factly. “And they tell their friends. You’ve seen *The Birds*, right? Oh sure, it’s just a movie...until you realize that it can actually happen.”

“This isn’t a movie.”

“Are you sure about that? You’re the one living in a haunted house.”

Again Aaron stared at him.

“I’m just saying. I know you don’t believe in this stuff, but maybe the house is a beacon.”

“A *beacon*?” Aaron gave Eric a dubious look.

“Since when are you so skeptical of everything? Maybe it’s a beacon, and that’s why people think it’s haunted in the first place. You know how certain places can have certain frequencies?”

“No.” Aaron shoved his hands into the front pockets of his jeans, staring at the carcass before him. “I really have no idea what you’re talking about.”

The thing really was huge. Eric bet it rivaled his grandmother’s old tabby cat. When that cat had finally kicked the bucket it had weighed over thirty pounds. His mind began to wander, jumping from one urban legend to the next: crows snatching up those little Yorkie dogs city girls carried around like fashion accessories, crows kidnapping babies from strollers when their mothers looked away.

“You know, like electromagnetic fields...” Eric continued.

“Well, is there some way you can *check* that?” Aaron asked.

“You mean prove it’s a beacon?” Eric pressed his lips together in a tentative line, considered it, then shrugged in response. “I’m sure someone can, but I’m not that guy.”

“I thought you *were* that guy.”

“Because I head a ghost hunting society?” He grimaced, crossed his arms over his chest. He was sensitive about all those friendly jabs only because he knew NAPS was a joke. He had started the group with the vision of it becoming *the* paranormal group of Arkansas—a group that traveled all over the state for investigations, that locals would call if they thought there was something weird going on in their house. He imagined himself as one of the guys on television, setting up motion detectors and interviewing freaked-out homeowners, assuring them that everything was going to be fine.

We’re on the case, ma’am. Nothing to worry about. Just a poltergeist. Just a demon. Just the Devil himself trying to eat your soul. Good thing you called when you did.

And yet, after nearly ten years running, NAPS had a total of three members—Eric included—and had been contracted a total of zero times. They had gone on a few field trips but had never caught anything of significance. All in all, NAPS was a complete and utter failure, but Eric had too much pride to let it disband.

“What you’re talking about is something completely out of my realm of knowledge,” Eric admitted. “If you were anyone else, I’d consider blowing smoke up your ass, but honestly, I don’t even know how to measure something like that. If it was just one room of the house, then yeah...”

“I don’t even know why I’m considering it,” Aaron murmured, as if suddenly feeling ridiculous for entertaining the idea.

“Because it’s science,” Eric protested. “Regardless of whether or not you believe it, we’re sensitive to that stuff. If you put a person in a room and play a certain frequency, you can make them sick, nervous, scared, whatever. And they don’t have a clue as to why they’re feeling that way. Hell, there’s a frequency out there that’ll make you crap your pants on cue. I kid you not. You’re just standing around, sipping your caramel macchiato, none the wiser, and then...” Eric pursed his lips and blew a raspberry. “I read about it.”

“On the Internet?”

“Doesn’t matter where.”

“Pretty sure it does.”

“Point is: People poop their pants all the time,” Eric said. “You could be next.”

“What does this have to do with the birds?”

“Maybe nothing, maybe everything.” Eric shifted his weight, canted his head to the side as he peered at the greasy-looking feathers of the bird between them. “Maybe this house gives off a specific frequency and that’s why it creeps the shit out of people. Maybe that’s why birds are flying into your windows. Frequencies.”

Aaron pressed his hands to his face in a bone-weary way. “But you have no way of testing that theory.”

Eric hesitated, not wanting to admit defeat, but he eventually let his shoulders slump and murmured, “No. I mean, we can meter the place if you want. I’ve got an EMF detector at home.”

“Forget it,” Aaron said.

Looking back down at the bird, Eric imagined it swooping down from a tree and pecking his eyes out. What kind of a bird could hold a grudge? Only one that the devil made. “What are you going to do with this thing?” he asked.

“I don’t know, toss it into the woods, I guess...”

“Uh, you think that’s the best idea?”

“Why not?” Aaron asked. “A wolf will get it.”

“Crows are the harbingers of death,” Eric reminded him.

“So, what are you saying? If I touch this thing, I’ll be cursed or something?”

“Well, *no*, but...”

“Good.” Leaning down, Aaron grabbed the bird by its foot and hefted it off the planks. “Because I gotta tell you, I’m *already* fucking cursed.”

“Oh God.” Eric winced and backed away, not wanting to be anywhere near that crow, watching Aaron stagger backward, push open the screen door, and wobble down the stairs.

“This thing weighs a ton.”

Eric followed him across the front lawn, stopping where he stood when Aaron swung the crow back and forth like a pendulum before releasing it for its final flight.

“Shit, wait,” Eric protested, but his objection came a second too late. He winced as the bird clumsily cartwheeled through the air and smacked

into the trunk of a tree. “Oh, Christ,” he mumbled, covering his face with a hand. If crows *were* mystical in some sort of way, Eric was sure that particular one would be coming back for vengeance.

Aaron turned back to the house, rolling his right shoulder as if he’d popped something out of place. Eric watched his gaze trail upward to the oaks that lined the driveway, a mass of starlings chirping along the branches. He would have suggested Aaron climb up there and knock their nests down but thought better of it, remembering how Fletcher had died when he and Aaron were eight. Instead, he posed a question he already knew the answer to.

“You want me to come back with my meter later?”

Aaron shook his head.

“It’s kind of ironic, don’t you think?”

“What is?” Aaron asked.

“The fact that you’re having bird trouble, and all your tats—at least the ones anyone can see—are of birds. Maybe *you’re* the beacon.”

Aaron’s face went strangely blank at that suggestion, and after a moment Eric shrugged as if to discredit his own suggestion.

“Anyway, I should get going. I’m supposed to stop by my mom’s place, help the old man with some sort of computer problem. When I talked to him this morning, he told me he ‘broke the world wide website.’ You want help cleaning up?”

“No, it’s all right,” Aaron told him, sounding distant.

“Hey,” Eric said, “Don’t sweat it. The bird thing, it’s just a weird coincidence. I’ll see you around?”

“See you around,” Aaron echoed as Eric pulled his keys out of his pocket and made his way to his Pontiac.

He sat in the driveway for a while, watching the way Aaron stared out into the trees where that dead crow lay. Something about it gave him the creeps, but he couldn’t put his finger on it.

“Bury it,” he muttered to himself, shoving his key into the ignition. “It’s not too late.”

And then he pulled out of the driveway and eased the car onto the street.

Ten

Aaron set up the camcorder on one of the front windowsills, pressed RECORD, and backed away from the device. He didn't know whether Eric had been serious about the suggestion of setting up the camera as a makeshift surveillance system or not, but it seemed like it was worth a try. The device only had a four-hour capacity, but four hours was better than nothing. It was already half past midnight; if someone was going to sneak up on the house, they'd more than likely do it in that window.

Climbing the stairs, Aaron pulled his T-shirt over his head, tossed it toward his open bedroom door, and stepped into the bathroom. He smelled like a bonfire after his fight with the barbecue pit. Cranking the bathtub faucet into the red, he waited for the water to run hot while kicking off his jeans, then stepped into the tub and drew the shower curtain closed.

He stood beneath the warm torrent, water slithering down images of ravens and sparrows that decorated his skin, coiling across the eagle's wings that circled his neck. He imagined the rain he was missing back home. It didn't rain much in Ironwood, but when it did it brought with it an air of celebration. Summer downpours had always been the best. Aaron would bolt out the front door and run barefoot across the lawn, his arms outstretched to collect as much water on his T-shirt and shorts as possible, his feet splashing in warm, marshlike pools. The butterflies came out after the rain, their wings fluttering in the humidity as they flitted around Edie's garden. Aaron pursued them as best he could. He'd try to sneak up on the colorful insects and carefully catch them by their wings. Uncle Fletcher had constructed a small enclosure in the backyard for Aaron's fleeting hobby of collecting insects; he wanted to fill it with butterflies for his aunt—a gorgeous ecosystem of oscillating color, a living rainbow just for her.

Perhaps Edie's love of butterflies was what had spurred Aaron's fascination with birds. Maybe the kid who was stalking him had some supernatural ability, telepathy revealing all of Aaron's most intimate details: Ryder's name, the birds piled on the living room floor like a gruesome offering to the house's new occupant.

Standing in the spray of the shower, Aaron closed his eyes, trying to imagine himself back home with Evangeline, but all he saw was the way Holbrook House had looked when he was a kid—sunny, well-kept,

nothing like what it was now with its dirty wallpaper and peeling paint. He saw

Edie climbing the stairs, her eyes wide with confused inquiry. Aaron was standing at the top of the stairs, a delicate spray of red decorating his face, his arms, his hands. Edie stopped upon the last riser and stared at him, her eyes darting from his face and toward his bedroom door. She opened her mouth as if to scream, but she wasn't given the chance. Aaron smashed the baseball bat he held in his hands against her temple and she went flying backward, soundless save for the thud of her body against the stairs.

Aaron whooped as he followed her down to the first floor. He watched her writhe at the foot of the stairs for a moment, a tingle of enjoyment buzzing inside his guts as she tried to pull herself across the floor, a whimpering moan spilling from her lips. She reached an arm toward the door, as if reaching for it would summon it closer, would somehow aid in her escape. But there was no escape. Dropping the bat onto the hardwood floor, Aaron watched himself skip down the hallway into the kitchen before drawing a knife out of one of the kitchen drawers. But when he turned around to return to the front room, Aaron's face was replaced by his stalker's leer.

The kid took his time getting back to the base of the stairs, Edie clawing at the floor as she pulled herself across the planks like a soldier in the field. The kid cocked his head to the side as he watched her struggle, then straddled her with a little laugh and poised the butcher's knife above his head, held fast in both hands. Edie jerked against the bite of

cold water. Aaron blinked, surprised to be where he was, the bathroom filled with steam. Shutting off the water, he shoved the shower curtain aside, that familiar panic taking hold of his heart. He wrapped a towel around his waist and backed away from the tub, twisted to stare at himself in the wet mirror above the sink.

"What the fuck?" he whispered, pressing his fingers hard against his eyes. He couldn't get the image out of his head—the way Edie had flown down the stairs, the kid skipping down the hall, the flash of that knife. Maybe Cooper was right—Doc Jandreau had been a quack to recommend coming back here, locking himself away in this house of nightmares. Of

course it would drive him insane, because what was here beside bad memories and poisoned dreams?

Not bothering to dry himself off, he padded down the hall and into his bedroom, grabbed the bottle of Ativan off the bedside table, and shook a couple into his palm. He should have flushed those pills down the toilet the day he arrived, but he had kept them just in case, *just in case*...and now he was glad he hadn't followed quack Jandreau's orders and dumped them the way he was supposed to.

"Sorry, Doc," he murmured, tossed the pills into his mouth, and lifted the can of Coke from next to the bedside lamp, shaking it. Empty. Moving through the upstairs breezeway, he stepped into the bathroom and made a beeline for the sink. He cranked the cold water, ducked down, and slurped from the stream to wash the pills down, nearly choking when a loud bang sounded from down the hall.

A door slammed closed, and not by any crosscurrent or breeze.

It was a slam forceful enough to rattle the hinges, a slam loud enough to shake the walls.

Every nerve in his body buzzed. Every hair on his body stood on end. He tore his eyes away from his own startled reflection, his mouth dry despite the water he'd just drunk. Squeezing his eyes shut and willing himself to stay calm, he curled his fingers around the edge of the sink

did I just imagine that?

counted to ten

am I awake?

and after an extended moment of breathless stasis

is this a dream, or is someone really inside the house this time?

he broke into a run and bolted back to his room.

Dropping to his knees at the side of his bed, he shoved his hand beneath it and grabbed the hard plastic case that housed his Glock .45. He jumped as another door was hurled against its frame,

Jesus Christ

trembling hands fumbling with the magazine as he slid it into the pistol grip. He wasn't sure why he even bothered loading the gun—what was he going to do if that bastard kid was screwing around downstairs, shoot him? Despite the kid being a pain in the ass, if Aaron accidentally

killed him, he'd never forgive himself. But then Eric's outlandish suggestions came flooding back:

Backwoods cannibals.

Ozarks freaks.

"Shit." He breathed the word into the darkness of his bedroom, cautiously padding barefooted toward the open door. His brain expanded and contracted with the thudding of his pulse. He opened his mouth to speak, to issue some kind of warning, and nearly jumped out of his skin when a third slam sounded from the ground floor.

A single thought jammed his circuits: *Please don't make me shoot you, kid. Please don't make me fucking shoot.* He moved into the upstairs hall, peeked over the banister to see if there was anyone there, but the area around the base of the stairs was clear.

Aaron gritted his teeth and began his descent.

He pressed his back against the wall, the towel around his waist threatening to come loose. Holding his breath, he listened for movement, his gun held at the ready, his pointer finger resting against the trigger guard. Peeking around the corner, he scanned the front room as best he could, half expecting to spot another pile of dead birds in the middle of the floor—but the room was empty, and from what he could see, the birds hadn't reappeared. Slinking along the hallway wall toward the kitchen, he knew his movements were soundless, but every breath felt like a scream; every careful footfall seemed like a stomp.

Aaron stopped in the mouth of the kitchen, clenched his teeth, and dared to poke his head out into the open. But there was nothing. The room was empty, completely undisturbed. He jutted out his arm, and ran it along the kitchen wall until his palm found the light switch. The overhead light clicked on, illuminating the room through an old plastic shade that needed to be replaced. The room glowed in a sickly saffron hue, giving the sorry state of the kitchen an even more somber look of disrepair.

He checked the downstairs bathroom and the hallway closet, ducking around corners and pointing that gun like Clint Eastwood, if Clint Eastwood was doing house rounds in nothing but a towel. But there was simply nothing to shoot. The doors were locked; the windows were securely latched; nobody was hiding in the shadows, but his heart continued to slap against his diaphragm at a million miles an hour. There

was no chance of getting to sleep now, at least not without soothing his nerves first. The Ativan wouldn't kick in for at least another ten minutes, and he had been too sore to drive into town for more booze.

Abandoning the gun on the kitchen counter, he shoved his head into the fridge, snatched a pint of chocolate ice cream out of the freezer, and shoveled a spoonful of the stuff into his mouth. His brain screamed out against the momentary freeze, but it was a welcome sensation. Anything was better than that familiar tension. He ate until the ice cream was gone, left the chocolate-smeared container and spoon on the kitchen table, and began to slink toward the hallway, ready to stalk back upstairs and attempt to will himself to sleep.

But he paused just shy of the hallway, the hair on the back of his neck bristling when he realized what he was seeing.

Someone was there.

Someone was standing in the hallway, staring right at him, half-concealed by the shadows that clung to the walls.

Aaron stared into the darkness, making out the curve of what looked like a shoulder, the delicate line of a neck. He backtracked to the counter, grabbed his gun, and pointed it at the figure. Sickened with a sense of foreboding, he heard his voice crack, dry with apprehension: "Who's there?"

No response.

The figure remained static, unmoving.

Aaron dared take another step forward, expecting the figure to bolt down the hall and out the front door, but it stayed where it was. Despite the loaded gun held firmly in his hands, Aaron felt panic claw at his neck, threatening to choke the life out of him, but the closer he got to the hall, the less pronounced the figure became. It was *fading*, nothing but a trick of the light: a shadow, slowly dissipating until it completely disappeared.

Aaron flipped on the hallway light and stared at its nondescript walls, nothing remarkable about that part of the house save for the bit of wallpaper that had flopped down close to the ceiling, exposing a raw partition beneath. Turning away from the hall, he couldn't keep his teeth from chattering, not sure whether he was cold or actually that afraid. He sat down to catch his breath, to figure out what the hell was happening.

You're losing your mind, that's what's happening.

He had heard the doors slam shut just as he had seen someone standing on his front porch. Could it be possible that Evangeline had been right? Was he hallucinating all of this?

But Ryder's name on the car door was real.

Except he wasn't even sure about that anymore. Sure, *he* had seen it, but Eric had failed to mention it when he had come over. What if Aaron was the only one who *could* see it? What if that, too, was some extended delusion that had slipped beyond the fringes of his imagination and was now tainting some alternate version of reality?

He slouched in his chair, his hands pressed hard against the hollows of his eyes. When he finally allowed his hands to drop to the table, he found himself staring at a perfect circle of condensation against the wood. It was the spot where he had left his empty pint of ice cream only moments before. But now it was gone.

Slowly turning his head, he looked over his shoulder.

The empty pint sat next to the sink, the spoon lying next to it even though Aaron left it jutting out of the container at an angle.

Even though he knew he hadn't walked that stuff over to the counter.

Even though he knew.

But the empty ice cream pint was the least of his worries. Aaron stared wide-eyed at the once spotless surface of the new kitchen window, something inside him loosening, starting to pull free from the shackles of sanity.

Two handprints mired the glass, distinctly red, coagulated and glistening in the dull kitchen light.

Two handprints, connected at the thumbs.

A pair of bloody bird's wings, like a butterfly under glass.

Eleven

Aaron spilled out the front door and stumbled down the porch steps, nearly twisting his ankle as he tripped across what used to be the lawn. His heart clanged in his ears, drowning out the sound of the breeze, the rustling of leaves, the chirp of crickets, the singing of starlings that seemed to multiply by the day—the nests that had been empty when he arrived now crowded by birds that didn't seem to sleep.

He couldn't catch his breath, sure that any second his lungs would seize up and he'd die alone in the dark. He put the house to his back, the structure suddenly sinister rather than reminiscent of childhood memories and loss. He couldn't look at it anymore, couldn't sit within those walls for a second longer.

He pitched forward, his head leading his feet as he staggered to the driveway. He hesitated for only a moment, looking down at the driver's door where Ryder's name had been scrawled, but the name was no longer there.

You hallucinated everything, Evangeline whispered.

There are particular details about your case, Doc Jandreau explained, *that point to post-traumatic stress.*

Aaron jerked open the door, climbed inside the Tercel, and peeled away from the house in a spray of gravel, his tires screaming as he veered onto the street and barreled down Old Mill.

The Toyota careened into a truck stop parking lot just shy of the highway—the Blue Ox was closed; this was the only place within twenty miles that laid claim to an OPEN 24 HOURS sign. The young, sleepy-looking waitress failed to greet him at the door. She simply grabbed a greasy menu from the hostess stand and motioned for him to follow her with a torpid tilt of the head. Apathetically eyeing his arms and neck as Aaron slid into a booth, she didn't look impressed. There was no doubt she'd seen her share of strung-out crackies stumble into her diner at half past three, and if Aaron looked the way he felt, she probably assumed he'd just snorted a fat line of coke—last he checked, his eyes had been wide and red-rimmed, his hair wild. His nerves were so frayed they sizzled with each step.

Aaron gave the tired server an unhinged sort of smile before she unceremoniously dropped the menu on the table, then pulled a pad of

paper from her apron. Plucking a pencil from behind her ear, she leveled her gaze on one of her only patrons and breathed a listless sigh.

“Coffee?” she asked.

Had Aaron not been crawling out of his skin, he would have burst into crazy, cackling laughter at her lack of enthusiasm.

“Yes. And one of these.” He slid the menu across the table, his finger pressed against a glossy full-color photo of an omelet fit to induce a heart attack. He was suddenly ravenous, desperate to fill himself with something, anything, as long as it pulled him away from the edge of hysteria. The waitress scribbled down the order and turned.

“Extra cheese,” Aaron called out, suddenly overcome with a bout of Tourette’s. “Salsa on the side.”

The waitress slowly glanced over her shoulder, then continued on her way, probably rolling her eyes at the meth head taking up her precious time.

Aaron didn’t know if it would work, but he was determined to eat his way out of this anxiety attack, to swallow his delusions. The Ativan hadn’t done shit, and unless he wanted to break into Banner’s, he’d have to wait until sunup to drown himself again. Maybe his screwed-up visions, his nightmares, were actually a side effect of trying to cut down on his meds, of overexerting himself by working outside in the heat, of living in a creepy house in a middle-of-nowhere town. Maybe Doc Jandreau had been full of shit and coming back to Boone County had been the worst idea on the fucking planet; so bad that Aaron very likely had a hell of a case for getting his therapist’s practicing license revoked.

When his coffee came, he gulped it down despite its heat. His omelet arrived a few minutes later, and he slathered it with salsa and began to chew, desperate to silence his tumbling thoughts with cheese, sautéed mushrooms, and strips of shoe-leather steak. He decided that a call to Cooper was in order. He’d let him yuck it up for an hour or two.

You’re going crazy because it’s Arkansas, he’d say. Better get out of there before all your teeth fall out. Better jet before you start wearing overalls and chewing stalks of wheat.

Aaron shoved another forkful of food into his mouth, his gaze settling on a guy at the far end of the diner. He recognized the T-shirt. *Stop staring at my bass.* It was the tow guy. Aaron’s eyes snapped back to his plate as

Mr. Bass turned his head, focusing on his too-early breakfast, and hoped the tow truck driver didn't get shot through the heart by a sudden pang of loneliness and decide he was up for a chat.

Rumor has it you're supposed to be dead.

Aaron had been struck by the oddness of the guy's statement during their otherwise silent ride to Vaughn's that morning—it hadn't made sense because Aaron had yet to hear the rumor for himself. He hadn't known that *he* was supposed to be haunting Holbrook House—the kid who'd killed his aunt and disappeared into the woods. But now Mr. Bass's assertion made his stomach churn around that greasy, chewed-up omelet, because the rumor was true.

Aaron wasn't supposed to be here.

He was a perversion of mortality.

People weren't supposed to rise from the dead.

He suddenly recalled an offhand comment he had made to Evangeline years before, something about her beloved ghost shows, about how easy it was to buy an EMF detector off of eBay and start up a ghost hunting society. Hell, Eric had done it and he was a grocery store manager. It didn't take a special license, just the willingness to believe.

Not everyone has been to the other side, Evangeline told him before relating the tale; the host of the ghost show had been an everyday schmoe like everyone else until he died and went to heaven. When he was revived, he was able to communicate with the dead. *It's a gift*, she said.

Back then, Aaron had rolled his eyes at the idea of it, but now his eyes went wide.

He pushed his plate away, no longer hungry. Grabbing his coffee cup, he threw his head back but got nothing. The bitter liquid had been refilled twice; after that, the waitress decided not to refill it anymore, possibly to expedite Aaron's exit. Mr. Bass was looking at him again, this time with far more interest than before, rubbing at his unshaved chin. Overwhelmed by an abrupt need to get out of there, Aaron reached into his pocket and tossed a crumpled twenty onto the table, then marched into the parking lot, his eyes down, his shoulders slouched, his hands shoved into the pockets of his jeans.

With his gaze averted, he nearly missed the kid standing on a bright yellow parking curb a few spaces shy of his car. The truck stop was a

good two miles outside of town, its bright neon sign casting an eerie glow across an abandoned highway, lighting up the kid's dark hair with ghostly incandescence. He was facing away from the parking lot, as though watching something in the darkness beyond, but Aaron knew exactly who he was. The wild thatch of his hair gave him away, standing up in crazy wisps like peaks of whipped cream.

Aaron glared at the kid's back, wondering if he should say something; maybe offer up a truce or grab him by the throat and threaten his life. The latter would get him arrested, no doubt, but at least the cops would come. Aaron would finally give Officer Helpful his long-awaited positive ID on the kid who'd been tormenting him since the day he arrived.

The kid's arms worked in front of him, as though he were folding paper or twisting the sides of a Rubik's Cube. Taking a shallow breath, Aaron shoved his hand into the back pocket of his jeans, but his cell wasn't there. In his panic he'd left it inside the house; he'd stayed only inside long enough to pull on some clothes and grab his keys. He shot a look back at the diner—he'd ask the waitress to call the police while he waited in the parking lot until they arrived, and if the brat tried to make a run for it, Aaron would follow him and see where he went. If he couldn't get the kid's identity, he could at least find out where he lived. An address would be just as effective to get the Ironwood police off their asses and onto the case.

Aaron backed up—ready to make a beeline back to the restaurant—when the kid giggled to himself. He finally turned, his hands cupped together next to his chest, and Aaron's breath left him entirely.

The little bastard was holding a yellow finch, the bird's wings flapping against his palms. He was wearing the same pair of navy coveralls Aaron had noticed during his first morning in town—the kind a plumber or mechanic

or an inmate

would wear. But this time there was an embroidered name patch stitched just below the kid's right collarbone, RYDER carefully scripted across a white background in a blazing, bloody red.

Aaron's mouth went dry.

He couldn't speak, couldn't swallow, couldn't breathe as the kid gave Aaron a menacing grin.

Frozen in place, he could do nothing but stare as the kid lifted the bright yellow bird to eye level, inspecting it the way Sylvester would scrutinize Tweety; and just when it seemed that he was ready to let the creature fly away, he crushed it in his hands and shoved it into his mouth.

Aaron wanted to scream, but he didn't have the air.

The boy continued to chew with a satisfied, unholy expression, gilded feathers jutting out from between his lips, hollow bones crunching beneath his teeth. And then he crouched on the parking curb, as if ready to spring forward and gouge out Aaron's eyes for witnessing such perversion. But rather than lurching forward, the kid turned and launched himself into the shadows, bolting through the weeded field along the highway until Aaron couldn't see him anymore.

Struck dumb by what he had witnessed outside the truck stop, Aaron drove to the only place that felt remotely safe—Banner's parking lot. He had tried to convince himself that everything he'd seen had been in his head, had tried to sleep, but rest came in few-minute intervals—just enough to stiffen his neck, but not enough to let him escape. He wanted to call Cooper, but there was no way in hell he was going back home to get his cell. Feeling strung out and exhausted, he waited for Eric's Firebird to pull into the lot. When it didn't appear, Aaron slid out of his car and dragged himself toward the store anyway.

He lethargically wheeled a cart from aisle to aisle, the stupid thing's right front wheel spinning around like a lunatic top. He headed to the liquor department first, feeling as guilty as he did justified. He had been relatively sober for nearly three months before coming back to Boone County—three months of nothing but an occasional beer with Cooper and the guys, always stopping at one, never even feeling a buzz. This, however, was the last place to get clean.

I'm sorry, he thought, directing his apology toward Cooper, toward Doc Jandreau, toward Evangeline who no longer cared. I can't do this here. I'll start over when I get back to Oregon. It'll be better there. I just can't handle this alone.

He grabbed two bottles of Jack off the shelf, snatched some Grey Goose for good measure, and rounded it off with a case of Boston Lager. Next, he headed to the freezer section for pizza and milk.

Shivering in the dairy aisle, he nearly jumped out of his skin when a pair of hands covered his eyes from behind. He veered around way too fast, unable to keep his nerves in check.

Cheri's smile wavered at his response. She pulled her hands away like a child recoiling from fire and bit her lip. "Hi," she said, sounding unsure. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you." She twisted her red hair at the nape of her neck before letting it go. The fluorescent lights of the dairy cooler made her skin glow pale blue. "I've been following you since the cereal aisle," she said. "I was waiting for you to see me but you seem distracted." She lifted a shoulder in an easy shrug, canting her head to the side as she studied him. "Jesus, Aaron, you look..."

He gave her a tired smile. He hoped she wouldn't say it, but he appreciated the worry that drifted across her face and settled in the corners of her downturned mouth.

Her gaze darted to his cart; she noted his intended purchase of booze and pizza, and looked back at him with a frown. "Okay, now I'm really concerned."

His chest was still tight.

He didn't feel well.

"I'm fine," he said.

"Aaron, come on..."

"Really," he assured her. "Just a rough night."

"Bullshit," she said. "Something's up."

"Nothing's up."

She rolled her eyes at him. "Look, I get that we haven't seen each other in forever, but you really think I don't know? You may *look* different, but you haven't changed a bit, and something is definitely up. What is all this?" She motioned to the whiskey, the vodka, the beer.

He felt dizzy. Something akin to heartburn clamored up his windpipe. Part of his brain advised him to be defensive. This wasn't her business. Who was she to question what he chose to spend his money on? If he wanted to get shitfaced, that was his right as an adult. But the reasonable side of him told him to keep his cool, to value the fact that she actually cared.

"I haven't been sleeping well," he said, choosing to avoid the subject of alcohol altogether.

“Have you been eating?”

They stood less than two feet apart now, speaking in hushed tones next to the sour cream and half-and-half. Aaron pictured them from an onlooker’s perspective—standing too close to each other, her hand on the handle of his cart.

“I ate,” he said.

“When?”

He hesitated, swallowed against the memory of that truck stop, that kid, the little bird, the way he had sprung away like some sort of feral animal. It had been inhuman, like something straight out of Lovecraft.

“Last night, or this morning, depending on how you look at it.”

“Depending on how you look at it,” she repeated, unsatisfied. “Come on; I’ll make you something.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“I know that sounded like a suggestion,” she said, “but it actually isn’t up for debate.”

“I don’t know, Cher.” He looked down into his cart: pizza, a bag of chicken nuggets, a few TV dinners.

“You don’t know what?” Cheri nudged his sneaker with the tip of her high-heeled shoe. “Whether or not I can beat a Swanson turkey dinner?”

“No, I’m sure you can.”

“Then what?”

He exhaled a breath through his nose, then looked at her again. “Miles strikes me as a bit of a, I don’t know...”

“A dick?”

“I was going to say intimidating.”

“Yeah, I guess he’s that, too. But I don’t know what Miles has to do with making you lunch.”

“He’d be there, wouldn’t he? At home?”

Aaron’s mouth went pasty at Cheri’s cagey smile.

He couldn’t deal with this, not now.

But this was Cheri Miller. He couldn’t just blow her off, not after how she had cried against his shoulder, how she had looked at him at the shop, how he had left her behind once before like she hadn’t mattered one iota, not one fucking bit.

“Who said anything about *my* place?”

Elbowing Aaron out from in front of the basket, she swung the cart around to face the opposite direction.

But he couldn't go back to the house.

"Wait," he said. "I don't..."

His words faded like the last few notes of a song. What was he going to tell her, that he was seeing things; that he believed the place was haunted? *Did* he believe it was haunted? Logic screamed no, but his reluctance to head back down Old Mill told a different story.

"You don't what?" Cheri arched an eyebrow at him, taking him in with a skeptical eye. Could she see that he was afraid? "What's with you?" she asked. "You haven't let Eric's stupid stories get to you, have you?"

Aaron didn't respond at first, but the moment he failed to answer she was shaking her head at his silence. He cut her off before she could say more.

"I've been having nightmares."

It was a legitimate reason as any to avoid the place. There was something about it, a bad energy that was screwing with his chi. He didn't have to believe the place was occupied by ghosts to suffer from bad dreams. He could blame it on memories, on faulty wiring, on shifts in the atmosphere or the incessant chirping of birds in the trees.

On frequencies.

"You're having nightmares because you aren't eating right," Cheri said matter-of-factly, "and you look like you haven't had a decent night's sleep in God knows how long." She gave him a look, one that was steadfast and weighty with conviction. "Maybe you shouldn't be staying there. Too many memories all at once. A motel might be better."

He didn't respond.

"Or maybe it's what I said, and your pizza and booze diet is making you nuts." She pushed his cart away from the dairy cooler and back toward produce without another word.

Aaron trailed her through the store like a reluctant shadow, walking the aisles he'd already visited while trepidation weighed down his feet. He watched her toss groceries into his cart, flashing back to when she used to make him and Eric play house. She made Eric be the neighbor or the mailman while Aaron was always the husband—she and him, happily married homeowners at eight years old.

At fourteen she let him put his hand up her shirt, and for a second he'd seen his future flash before his eyes: marriage, kids, family vacations like the ones Eric went on every summer—Disneyland, the Grand Canyon, Florida beaches, and trips to Washington D.C. Holbrook family vacations never went much farther than Saint Louis or Little Rock; they didn't have the money and neither did the Millers. Both Aaron and Cheri lived vicariously through snapshots Eric would bring up to the tree house, telling them stories about how he had seen a whale swimming in the Pacific, or how Mickey Mouse had scared the bejeezus out of a little kid on Main Street U.S.A.

"What's Main Street U.S.A.?" Aaron had asked, but before Eric had a chance to answer, Cheri answered for him.

"It's the street I'm going to live on when I grow up," she said. "The street we're *all* going to live on together, next door to one another, and we'll be happy forever."

The longer Aaron followed Cheri through Banner's aisles, the more convinced he became that she was just as lonely as him. It was confusing. She had a husband, a business, a life. On one hand, he wanted to catch her by the shoulder and explain that he was married, too; that regardless of whether or not Evangeline ever wanted to see him again, he was determined to honor his vows because he was sure, *positive*, that they were going to get back together. They'd both heal on their own and realize they couldn't live without each other. Things would go back to normal if he waited long enough, at least as normal as they could be with two people rather than three.

On the other hand, he knew it was bullshit—nothing but a pipe dream. Evangeline would never take him back, not after losing Ryder, not after the way Aaron had fallen into despair, drinking himself into a stupor rather than offering her comfort. Evangeline had turned away from him, had moved on inside her head long before he'd ever agreed to see a therapist, long before he chose to come out here to set himself straight. But the fact that he was alone didn't give him the right to sweep into Ironwood and destroy Cheri's marriage. It didn't give him license to screw up other people's lives.

"It's just lunch," Cheri said softly, reassuringly touching his arm as though having read his mind. "Okay?" A practiced sense of positivity

drifted from her tone.

“Okay,” he said after a moment, the heaving of his heart suffocating any additional words. Because even though she said it was just lunch, Aaron knew better. He could see it in the way she glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. Or maybe she really was that concerned—a mother hen fretting over an egg twenty years lost; an old friend reaching out a helping hand while Evangeline exiled him from her life. Nine years of marriage and raising a kid for nearly as long, and she’d turned away from him as though she had never loved him at all.

Aaron frowned as he watched Cheri drop a few tomatoes into a plastic produce bag, remembering how Evan had stepped into his hospital room, her eyes downturned, unable to meet his gaze. Once he got back home, she tried to make things right, but Aaron kept to himself, drifting out of rooms as soon as she drifted in. She had tried to reconnect with him, had tried to tell him that she didn’t blame him, that it was an accident, that he couldn’t possibly believe this was his fault—but he did believe that, and he buried himself six feet deep beneath his own guilt. That’s when Evangeline started spending nights at her mother’s. She said seeing him that way made her avoid coming home. And then, after a night of bar crawling with Cooper and his old EMT buddies—after way too much drinking and Cooper asking him to slow down, only to end up driving him home—Aaron found an invoice tacked to the microwave with a corner of Scotch tape. It was for a storage unit a few blocks from home, taken out under his name with his credit card. She had left a stack of flattened boxes sitting against the wall next to the front door and a sticky note with Doctor Jandreau’s number tucked into his sock drawer. She had reached the end of her patience. She wanted the house back. If he needed time to fix himself, that was fine, but she didn’t want to be forced to watch; she had watched for long enough.

He still loved her, knew he always would. He wanted nothing more than to have her back, but he also hated her for what she’d done. Yes, he’d gotten carried away with the booze, but he drank because he hurt—he drank because if he didn’t, he’d have killed himself instead. Would she rather have had a dead husband too? How many times had he imagined her coming back from her mother’s to his dead body laid out across the bed? How many times had he considered getting his job back just to

accidentally step into traffic so she could get the money? Insurance didn't pay for suicide, but work-related death paid double.

"Aaron?"

His eyes drew themselves across the grocery store's linoleum floor, pausing on the tips of Cheri's purple high heels before meeting her gaze. She shook her head faintly, her hair sweeping across her shoulders, that same look of uneasiness assuring him that he could lie to her all he wanted, but she knew he was far from okay.

"After you," he told her, crossing his fingers that the acceptance of her invitation would derail any oncoming questions.

Are you sure you're all right?

Aren't you supposed to be dead?

For a moment Cheri stood motionless, possibly reconsidering what she'd just put into play, potentially having second thoughts because she knew as well as he did that this wasn't as innocent as they were both pretending it was.

This was crazy.

A bad idea, like calling Evangeline drunk.

It would end with the inevitable—a relationship stitched together by fond memories, recollections of the people they were but ceased to be.

But rather than taking a backward step, Cheri quirked the corner of her mouth up into the half grin Aaron remembered well, and then her fingers drifted across the knuckles of his right hand.

Twelve

After pulling up the gravel driveway, Cheri leaned back in her driver's seat and stared at the Oregon plates on Aaron's Toyota. He was sitting in his car, motionless, more than likely psyching himself up. She could relate: she had nearly broken away from him a handful of times during the drive up Old Mill Road. Nervous as hell, she told herself this was fate; this was the moment she'd been praying for since she was fourteen years old.

Let him come back, let him be alive, let him find his way back home, and when he does, let him find me too.

But she was still jittery. Going through with this meant taking a big step away from Miles, and in the death throes of marital faithfulness she had to ask herself, was Miles really that bad? She tried to dredge up happy memories—the day they met, the night he proposed, the afternoon they got married, but all compasses pointed back to Aaron Holbrook. The day Cheri met Miles Vaughn, she wondered whether Aaron looked anything like him—beefy, with strong arms and long hair. The night Miles proposed, she couldn't help but wonder whether Aaron had already recited his own set of vows. And as she walked across Miles's parents' back lawn and stood beneath a crooked metal wedding arch, she imagined how much more beautiful Aaron's wedding must have been, or would be, or was.

A year after Aaron disappeared, she made up a lie—her closest friend and first love was dead, and he had only been a high school freshman. Listeners would gasp and rub her shoulder and express their condolences.

How terrible, how tragic, it must have been awful, you're such a strong girl.

She assured herself that the lie was the only way to move on, but even after she had buried him in her mind, his memory continued to haunt her every move.

Not having seen Aaron get out of his car, she nearly jumped when he knocked on her window. He leaned forward, his T-shirt gaping open enough at the neck to reveal a chest full of ink—a murder of crows flying up and around the curve of his ribs. His expression was obvious enough: *What are you waiting for?* She was waiting for a change of heart, a sudden

burst of clearheaded reasoning, but it refused to come, urging her onward, whispering into her ear, *You've waited too long to let this pass you by.*

If she drove away and Aaron vanished the following day, she'd live out the rest of her life wondering what if, what could have happened, what would have come of it if she'd only been brave enough to walk through his front door?

Aaron struggled with the sticky lock of the front door—grocery bags in hand—and when the door finally swung wide, Cheri stepped in behind him. He left her in the living room as she spun around, her gaze drawing across the walls, taking in the house she had visited a million times in her youth. It was little more than a shadow of its former self: dusty, the colors dulled by years of neglect, but it still looked miraculously the same. The furniture stood in the same spots, though the place was missing small details that made a house feel like home—books and trinkets, candles and plants. She assumed that the interior had been in too bad a shape to keep everything, though she noticed that he *did* manage to salvage the framed photos and the glass candlesticks she remembered well.

She eventually found her way to the kitchen, shaking her head with a faint smile. "It almost looks the same," she said. "Just a little bit of paint and maybe some new wallpaper and it'll be perfect." It felt like they should have been up in his room, listening to her Cure CDs on a loop, *accidentally* brushing hands while he explained Gin Rummy rules and tossed back SweeTarts. But Aaron was avoiding her gaze as he put the groceries away. Apprehension coiled up her throat. Maybe this was wrong. Just because Aaron had haunted her into adulthood didn't mean he felt the same way about her. For all she knew, he had forgotten about her completely until they ran into each other again. She was expecting too much. But he looked so forlorn, so sad-eyed and weighed-down, so beautiful with those ink swirls twining across his arms.

Cheri slid up to the counter and pulled a box of pasta from Aaron's grasp, the fingers of her free hand circling the wrist of his left arm. He tensed as she slid a fingertip up his scar.

"Will you tell me about this?" She tapped the puckered flesh of a healed wound beneath the image of a small golden owl, the groceries momentarily abandoned.

"You first," he said.

Her pulse hitched when he took a half step back.

“Me first what?”

“Tell me why you’re here.”

“What do you mean, why I’m here? You didn’t expect me to come see the house?”

“You know what I mean,” he said, and she grimaced at his reply. What did he expect her to say?

“Are you asking about me and Miles?” she asked, reluctant to meet his gaze. When he didn’t reply, she continued as best she could. “You think every married couple is thrilled to be together? Get married,” she told him. “Then you’ll know.”

Looking up, she took note of his posture. He was white-knuckling the edge of the kitchen counter as though letting it go would send him falling into the depths of despair. His jaw was set; she could see the muscles of his neck tense and relax, the tendons standing out like ribbons beneath his flesh.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

He shook his head, pushed away from the counter, grabbed a couple of bags of produce and walked them over to the fridge.

Stepping over to the table, Cheri slid into one of the chairs and kicked her pumps off her feet. “We were happy before,” she began, “but then we got married and Miles opened up the shop. He’s there seven days a week, sometimes twelve hours a day. He’d rather be there than at home; says that I should be glad he’s working so hard, seeing as to how it’s next to impossible to stay in business around here; says that I should be thankful, because the longer he works the more money I can spend. Great way to make a girl feel guilty.” She shrugged. “But that’s Miles’s way. He means well. So I decided, fine, I’ll help out at the shop; that way we could spend more time together and I wouldn’t feel so selfish when I bought myself something nice. But all I do is get him and the guys lunch every day. I sit in a sad little office waiting for the phone to ring, and when it does Miles chases me out of there so he can ‘take care of business,’ as if talking about mufflers and brake jobs requires some weird level of privacy, so I go outside and smoke.” She laughed to herself. “I used to hate cigarettes. Remember how we presented the dangers of smoking to my dad on that mangled poster board Eric found behind the store?”

Aaron nodded from across the kitchen.

It had been a stupid idea, especially since Cheri's dad was not only a smoker, but also a drunk. That particular bit of memory gave rise to a lump in her throat. Her gaze drifted to the twin bottles of whiskey on the counter. It twisted her up inside to think that Aaron had fallen victim to the same demons she had watched her father battle when she was a girl. She didn't want to picture him that way—red-faced and angry, raging as the alcohol took control.

"Aaron," she said, "I know something's wrong. Why are you really here? Who the hell comes back to a place like this?"

Aaron faced the counter, turning his back to her.

"Right," she murmured. "You're fixing up the house. Sell, sell, sell."

"I'm trying to kick a habit," he said.

Silence.

Her heart tripped over itself.

Was that why he looked so bad? Was it more than booze? Was he a junkie?

She stared a hole through his spine, waiting for him to turn around and look at her again. When he failed to do so, she straightened where she sat and allowed her voice to cut through the quiet.

"What kind of habit?"

"One obvious one," he said, slowly pushing one of the whiskey bottles against the wall.

Cheri swallowed, kneading her hands in her lap. "Just one?" She nearly whispered the words, afraid she was crossing the line with her inquiry, imagining him flying off the handle, telling her to get the hell out of his house—how dare she pry into his private life?

"Two," Aaron confessed.

Her hands twitched in response.

"What else?" she asked.

"Ativan."

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth, staring down at her hands. "Aaron," she said, "I don't know what that is."

"It's an antianxiety medication."

"Like Valium?"

"Sort of—more potent."

“You have anxiety?” she asked, chewing on a nail.

“It calms me down, helps me sleep.”

“But...” She hesitated, afraid to push too hard. “You said you weren’t sleeping,” she reminded him.

“Because it isn’t working anymore.” He still refused to face her. “I’m trying to quit, but...” His words faded to nothing, leaving his sentence unfinished.

Another drawn-out hush.

“Maybe you’re working too hard,” she suggested, motioning to the kitchen that was in the process of being renovated. “You need to rest.”

“I need to take my mind off of it, not rest. I’ve been resting for the better part of a year, waiting for this to fix itself.”

Cheri frowned down at her hands, then glanced up at him again with anticipation. “What happened a year ago?”

He exhaled a soft laugh, tipped his gaze up to the ceiling.

“That much?”

“And more,” he said. “And as far as getting married, I *know*.”

Caught off guard, Cheri opened her mouth to speak, then shut it soundlessly. Her heart took another tumble. Heat flushed her cheeks.

“You want to get away from Miles, and all I want is for Evangeline to take me back. Sweet irony.”

Cheri looked away. She felt like she was going to vomit and spontaneously combust all at once. “That means I should go, right?” She clenched her jaw, waiting for it:

Go on, get out of here, go back to your husband, I’ll wait here for my wife.

“She won’t talk to me anymore,” he told her. “I called her a few days ago, drunk off my ass. She told me not to call her again.”

Cheri swallowed against the lump in her throat.

“I keep hoping for a miracle,” he said, his gaze fixed on the tips of his sneakers. “Maybe *she*’ll call. Maybe she’ll show up out of the blue, stare up at this old house from the bottom of the driveway and declare it perfect, give me another chance. Maybe she’ll burst in here and be charmed, arrange for movers to bring our stuff out to Arkansas, where we’ll live happily ever after, the end.”

Main Street U.S.A., she thought to herself. *You were supposed to live there with me, not someone else.*

His words were killing her. Had he really come out to Ironwood just to wait things out?

“Except that’s never going to happen,” he told her. “And you know why?”

She shook her head, mute.

“Because nobody comes out here for happily ever after. This town is a ghost.”

“I don’t understand,” she said after a moment. “Back at the shop, you said you were only here to fix up the house, but now... Does that mean you might stay?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Seems like suicide. There’s nothing here.”

“So you’re going to leave...”

“I don’t know,” he repeated.

Cheri breathed out a sigh. His lack of commitment was aggravating. He was playing dumb because he was scared.

“Look, I’m not a mind-reader. If you’re waiting for her to come back to you, I shouldn’t be here. If you’re waiting, I don’t *want* to be here.”

“Want to be here for what? I don’t know what you’re talking about. Maybe I gave you the wrong idea,” he told his feet.

It was like a punch in the gut. She felt cheated. He’d brought her back here just to tease her. Or maybe he’d brought her back here because, like an idiot, she had insisted.

It’s just lunch.

A lunch she’d daydreamed about for twenty-one years. Such bullshit. And now she’d never be able to look him in the eye again.

“I should go,” she whispered, slipping her feet back into her shoes.

Aaron exhaled a breath and shook his head. “No, don’t. I just...” He hesitated, searching for the right words. “I don’t know. I’m fucked-up, Cher. Even if we could...”

Another unfinished sentence. Cheri waited for him to complete his thought, hanging on his every word.

“It wouldn’t be fair,” he finally said.

“Fair to who?” she asked.

“To either one of us. To you.”

So he was telling her to go, except when she said she was leaving he was asking her to stay. Cheri let out a slow, steadying breath.

“Aaron, if I don’t say this, I’ll regret it for the rest of my life.”

She wanted to look up, but she couldn’t bring herself to do it, afraid to see his expression, choosing to imagine that he was genuinely interested rather than standing there with a veil of immovable refusal across his face.

“I know we were young, too young to know anything, but when you disappeared...” She narrowed her eyes, resentful of the emotion that was creeping into her tone. She didn’t want to appear weak, not now, not the way she had in the shop’s lobby. She hated feeling vulnerable; determined to be stoic and invincible, like Aaron and Eric had been in her fondest memories.

“When you disappeared, everything sort of fell apart for me. It was as though you had taken a piece of me with you to wherever you had gone. I tried to let you go, but everywhere I looked there was a memory—you and Eric screwing around, the three of us in the summers when we were kids, the two of us...in the woods...just, everything. I always compared everyone to how I imagined you must have been. I always regretted not having a chance to tell you how I felt.”

Unable to help herself, she peeked up at him. He had gone so silent she wasn’t sure whether he was still listening, or whether he had left her alone in the kitchen and gone off to hide. But he was there, standing with his back against the counter, his eyes fixed upon her, an expression akin to pained fascination drawn across his face.

“I guess that’s why I’m here, why I’m so quick to toss aside my existing life for something new, something that includes you. Because it’s what I’ve always wanted.”

Again, she looked away, unable to handle his silence, his lack of movement.

“I know you aren’t going to stay here forever,” she said quietly. “I guess there isn’t much of a point to any of this. I just needed to tell you in case you decide to leave without saying goodbye.”

His lack of response was unnerving. She had to get out of there before she threw herself at him, had to leave before she started weeping like an overzealous mourner, embarrassing herself more than she already had.

Wobbling to her feet, she noticed that he had moved away from the counter and was now standing not more than two feet away, his hands gripping the top of one of the chairs.

“You regretted not having a chance to tell me,” he murmured. “So tell me now.”

A rush of heat burned the backs of her eyes. She had already been on the verge of tears, but they were coming in a mad rush now. Cheri turned away from him, pressing her hands to her face. Why was he doing this to her? He was married but he wasn’t; he wanted her to go but also to stay; he wanted her to spill her guts but he didn’t want to respond.

“Why?” she asked, wiping at her eyes, refusing to look at him, afraid that if she did she’d burst into full-on sobs.

“Because I need to hear it.”

“So you can tell me it doesn’t matter?”

He went quiet at that. She shook her head at the silence.

“No,” she finally decided. “I’ve said too much. Call me. Just call me if you really want to know.”

Twisting away from him, she gathered her purse and moved into the hall that would lead her to the front door. She faltered when she reached it, tossing a glance over her shoulder. Aaron was at the opposite end of the hall, staring down its length to where she stood. She wanted to repeat her request.

Please call me...just call me tomorrow and I’ll tell you everything. If you call me tomorrow, I’ll know I’m not in this alone.

But all she managed to eke out was “Sorry about lunch,” before ducking into the early afternoon heat.

Aaron sat on the living room sofa with his hands folded in front of him, his eyes fixed on the camcorder’s blinking red light. His mind raced as the device recorded his stasis, his thoughts tumbling over themselves too quickly to process. It was too much. Too much. *Too fucking much to deal with.* This wasn’t why he had come to Ironwood. This wasn’t what he had hoped to find.

“There’s no silence here.”

He spoke to the empty room, documenting his thoughts as he tugged on the hem of his stretched-out T-shirt, his hair a mess. Seeing his

reflection on the small LCD screen, he realized he looked ragged, nearing the bottom of a downward spiral.

“No silence,” he murmured. “It’s louder here than it was back home.”

He shoved his fingers through his hair, exhaled a tired breath.

“I’m drinking again.”

He scoffed at that, as if it were the most pathetic thing he’d heard himself say in a while.

“The Ativan is nearly gone. Not really sure what the hell I’m going to do when that happens. Probably drink more.”

He shook his head helplessly.

“Cheri...I haven’t been so happy or so terrified to see someone from my past in my entire life. Miles could break me in half, but she comes here anyway, tells me these things about how I’ve haunted her, how she’s never been able to forget, and I’m left standing here like...What do I say to that? What do I do?”

He pressed his fingers against his eyelids, dropping his hands after a moment, his palms slapping his knees.

“What do I fucking do?”

Silence.

“Evan isn’t coming back. Not unless I figure out how to rouse the dead. And these nightmares...or daymares...or hallucinations...or whatever the hell they are. I don’t understand them. None of it makes sense. Am I just seeing this shit because it’s in my head, or...”

A pause of consideration.

“It has to be in my head.”

He leaned back, drew his hands down his face, tilted his head up to the ceiling.

“Maybe I do need meds. Not everyone recovers from grief, right? Maybe I’m not supposed to be able to work through this.”

He leaned into the camera, his elbows against his knees, his head in his hands. Closing his eyes, he sat motionless for a long moment, fingers tangled in his hair.

“But if what I’m seeing is real, maybe that means that Ryder is here. Otherwise it doesn’t make sense. Paranormal or not, things can’t just be random. There has to be some sort of logic, some sort of order. If Ryder’s

name is showing up on my car door, on that kid's name patch, that means Ryder is putting it there. And wouldn't that be incredible?"

His gaze flitted to the camera, then away, unsure of his own train of thought.

"The dead reaching out to the living; my son, my little boy..."

He chewed on a knuckle, contemplating it.

"What if insanity is just a heightened sense of perception? Or maybe crazy *is* crazy and I'm losing my sh—"

A noise sounded in the background, like something heavy falling down the stairs.

Aaron's gaze darted to the hallway. He was frozen where he sat, but his breathing picked up the pace. He eventually got up from the couch, the camera focusing in on the faded knees of his jeans, continuing to record as he moved out of frame.

There was a subtle creaking of floorboards beneath Aaron's weight.

The camcorder picked up the whine of the bottom step as he began to climb.

It focused, then refocused on the crocheted blanket thrown across the back of Edie's couch, bright hand-stitched blooms giving the dimly lit room a misplaced sense of joy.

But the picture went fuzzy as the camera struggled to keep the image sharp, eventually focusing beyond the sofa and onto the back wall and the two windows on either side of the front door.

A shadow shifted in one of the corners.

A shadow shaped like a boy.

Thirteen

Aaron had fallen asleep on the couch again—it felt safer on the ground floor, easier to react to a cacophony of slamming doors or the ghostly thud of what he imagined his aunt had sounded like while tumbling down the stairs to her death. Sleeping with his head propped against one of the sofa arms at a ninety-degree angle resulted in a nice jolt of neck pain the moment he tried to sit up. He winced, sucked in a breath, and played possum for a few seconds longer, as though staying perfectly still would somehow coax his muscles into relaxation.

His gaze zeroed in on the television beyond the coffee table littered with stuff: a paper plate smeared with pizza sauce, four empty beer bottles, the camcorder, and his gun. The TV had been left on all night—another newfound coping mechanism. Its dancing blue shadows had been comforting, but now he could hardly see the picture on the screen beneath the glare of the morning sun. What he *could* see was the scrim of dust that continued to cling to furniture he had thoroughly cleaned. He'd polished that old coffee table a few times since he had arrived, but the dust seemed to meander from room to room like a lazy cat, lounging on whatever it deemed convenient and comfortable. It was as though the house didn't want to be renovated, happy in its current state of disrepair.

He steeled his nerves and pushed himself up to sit, immediately greeted good morning by wrenching pain. Slapping a hand against the side of his neck, he squinted against the sun, rolled his head from side to side, and threw his weight forward to get to his feet.

In the kitchen, he put on a pot of coffee and leaned tiredly against the counter as it percolated. He'd work on the front porch first—strip the old paint off of the boards with a chisel before it got too hot to breathe. Once the heat became stifling, he'd drive to Bennie's for another bacon cheeseburger. It had been a day since he had seen Cheri, and he still wasn't sure what to do. He crossed his fingers that a morning of vigorous manual labor and a belly full of red meat would help him reach a verdict on whether to call her or not.

Hot mug in hand, he slid into a chair and sipped his coffee while checking the news and the weather on one bar of reception, scrolling through his list of contacts, stopping on Cheri's name. Again, he found

himself unsure. Acceptance would mean taking a significant step away from Evangeline. Rejection would leave him where he was when all he wanted was to be somewhere else. It shouldn't have been a difficult decision. Evangeline wasn't coming back and Cheri was right there, smiling her half smile, tossing her hair over a shoulder, looking at him with longing that both excited and scared him.

She had built him up in her mind—a ghost from her past—dark and mysterious and probably far more interesting than he actually was. As far as Aaron was concerned, there was nothing interesting about him—at least, nothing beyond the shit that had turned him into a wreck, beyond the fact that he was potentially losing his mind. He placed his phone on the table and stared at its glowing screen.

He'd call her, but not yet.

He needed to think, had to give himself time to decide.

Sitting at Bennie's Burgers, Aaron let his gaze wander across the street to the hollow shell that had once been Ironwood High. He tried to enjoy his bacon cheeseburger but he couldn't tear his eyes away from the shattered front windows and the darkness that dwelled beyond.

What if the Grim Reaper is in there?

Eric's words echoed in Aaron's ears.

What if he's in there, waiting for his body count?

And then there were the crows; not one, but two gorgons watching at him with their beady black eyes, cawing at him, inching closer, making him feel claustrophobic, as though they knew; as though they were galled by their brother's inopportune fate.

Unnerved, Aaron gathered up his food and locked himself in the Tercel, took a bite of his burger, and slouched in his seat. He let his head loll back against the headrest and stared at the upholstered ceiling. One of the crows hopped onto the hood, its taloned feet scratching the paint. Aaron honked the horn to scare it off, but it didn't even flinch—it simply continued to tap dance on the Toyota's hot hood, as if challenging him to come out into the open and try to chase it off.

Aaron pictured the second one preparing to jet through the plastic sheeting that covered his broken window. He imagined it bursting through his thin veil of false security, scratching and pecking and screaming until

Aaron couldn't see it anymore; blind and bleeding, nothing but holes left where his eyes had been.

He shuddered.

Shoved the key into the ignition.

Ended up in the parking lot across the street from Vaughn Mechanical, the car smelling of ketchup and curly fries.

Cheri was a bad idea, but he needed her. She was the one who was going to set him straight, the person who would help him move on. If he could just get past the guilt, past his broken heart, he was sure these crazy visions would cease. He'd be normal again. He'd stop drinking and sleep would finally come. But he needed Cheri to help him get there. Without her he had no one; without her, he felt as though he was as good as dead.

He sent Cheri a text message: **Across the street. Can you talk?**

Less than thirty seconds later, a reply: **Follow me.**

A few minutes passed before Cheri walked out of the shop, casually climbed into her Ford, and drove north. Aaron pulled onto the road behind her, the bacon cheeseburger sitting heavy in his stomach. Grabbing for the cup of cola in the center console, he sucked down four successive gulps of Coke, wishing it were something other than soda, something that could soothe his nerves.

This was insane.

If Miles found out...

But Aaron couldn't allow that to matter. He was losing his grip, needed someone to ground him and keep him calm, to sit with him and hold his hand and tell him that all the shit he was seeing was just an illusion, that all the stories that surrounded his aunt's old house were exactly that, just stories, a bunch of bullshit, nothing more.

Cheri eased her Thunderbird into a gas station parking lot. Aaron pulled up to a pump and waited while she parked along the side of the convenience store, but rather than walking over to him directly, she went inside instead. He stared at his gas gauge—over half-full—and nervously drummed his fingers against the steering wheel. Cheri sauntered out of the store a minute later, a domed ICEE cup clasped in her right hand. She

shimmied across the parking lot to Aaron's Tercel, pulled the passenger door open, and slid inside like she'd done it a hundred thousand times before.

"Hi," she said, then arched an eyebrow at him. "Is that a sunburn?" She reached out to touch his cheek, then pulled her hand back, as if not wanting to overstep.

"Forgot the sunblock yesterday," he confessed.

"Still working nonstop, then?"

"No rest for the wicked," he said.

"It smells like fries in here." Glancing down to the center console in search of a place to put her cup, she quirked a smile at the Bennie's Burgers cup. "You've discovered the pride and joy of Ironwood, I see."

"Eric introduced me," Aaron told her, then pulled out of the bay.

Cheri stuck the bright red straw in her mouth and stared out the window, pointing him in the direction she wanted to go. Once they were on the highway, she fiddled with the radio, stopped on a classic rock station, and casually reached out to let her ice-cold fingers drift across his hand.

"I'm glad you texted me," she said. Their eyes met momentarily, and then they both looked away. Aaron was nervous, but so was she.

They ended up in the southernmost part of Missouri, just twenty miles shy of Ironwood proper, like two star-crossed lovers making a run for the border. Under Cheri's guidance, Aaron turned off the highway and onto a dirt road that stretched for miles. He wasn't convinced they were heading anywhere at all, but Cheri assured him they were going in the right direction. She called it her secret spot. Aaron didn't ask how she had found it or who she had been with when the discovery had been made. He didn't want to think about it, didn't want to know.

The road ended without warning, disappearing into a bank of towering pines. Aaron pulled off to the side of the road and they climbed out, Cheri leading the short hike down a steep embankment until they were standing on a small lakefront beach, water stretching out so far ahead of them, the horizon swallowed it whole. It was beautiful, secluded, a perfect spot for a secret rendezvous that Aaron still didn't know if he was ready for.

Cheri smiled at him, her mouth tinted cranberry red. "I told you it's pretty." She cradled her ICEE cup against her chest. "I bet if we had a boat

we could follow the shore all the way back to Stonehenge.”

Taking a seat on the bank, she pulled her wedge sandals off her feet, and patted the sand for Aaron to join her. He felt like a kid at his first boy/girl party—queasy with nerves, jittery, like he was ready to jump out of his own skin. Sinking onto the bank, he fiddled with the laces of his sneakers, not able to decide whether he wanted to pull them off or leave them on for a quick escape.

“Will you talk to me now?” she asked after a pause, drawing her attention from the mirrorlike surface of the water to his face. “I can’t force you to tell me anything, but I wish you would.”

He stared down at his hands, contemplating her request. He wanted to tell her everything, but he honestly didn’t know where to start.

“How’re things at the house?” she asked. “I ran into Eric when I swung by Banner’s after work. He mentioned you were having issues with some kids?”

“One kid,” Aaron clarified. “He’s got it out for me. I don’t know...”

“Probably one of the house regulars,” Cheri told him. “I, um...” She shrugged, as if embarrassed by her oncoming confession. “I used to swing by there a lot. Just random drive-bys, mostly.”

“Mostly,” he echoed. “What does that mean?”

She cleared her throat and gave him an apologetic look.

“You went inside?”

“Never with anyone,” she said softly. “And always during the day.”

A pang of aggravation ignited in his chest. That house belonged to his family; it was the scene of a tragedy, and what had Ironwood done? Broken out its windows and rifled through its rooms; made up gruesome stories and carelessly parked cars out on its front lawn. It turned his stomach to think that Cheri had been one of the people who had slunk through his house.

“I missed you,” she told him. “It was the only way I could think of to feel like you weren’t completely gone.”

“And the other kids?”

“What other kids?”

“The ones who would break in after dark.”

Cheri pressed her lips together in a tight line and looked down to the sand. “They didn’t mean anything by it,” she said after a long while. “The

house was abandoned. Nobody thought anyone would come back for it. Nobody ever comes back.” Her words faded, replaced by a helpless shrug.

Aaron chewed on his bottom lip, afraid to ask the question balanced on the tip of his tongue, but he had to know. “And you? What do you believe?”

“About the house?”

Aaron nodded faintly, refusing to meet her gaze.

“I think it’s a bunch of bored kids making up stories to scare themselves. I think it’s good that you came back, because now they know they were wrong.”

“Wrong about me being the ghost,” he clarified.

Cheri went silent, and Aaron shook his head at the memory of Mr. Bass’s words.

You’re supposed to be dead.

“I tried to convince myself,” she said. “But I never could believe it. I guess if I had, I would have eventually let you go.”

Aaron swallowed, dragged his fingers through the sand. “There’s some truth to that rumor,” he told her. His stomach twisted as the words left his throat. It wasn’t something he talked about with anyone; it was a subject he even avoided talking about with Cooper, and Cooper had been there; Cooper had been the one who had pulled him back from the other side.

He tensed when Cheri placed her hand on his arm. It was cold, frozen from being wrapped around the plastic cup.

“What are you saying?” she asked, but all he could do was shake his head.

His throat tightened.

His muscles tensed.

He felt like, at any minute, he’d get up and run up the embankment back to the car.

Grabbing Cheri’s cup from between her knees, he sucked down some ICEE, willed it to give him strength.

“I know it isn’t my place,” she said, “but I know fixing up the house is just an excuse. Maybe things would start to get better if you finally admitted why you’re really here.”

He handed back her cup, his pulse vibrating the inside of his skull.

Cheri reached across his lap, gently caught his left arm in her cold fingers, and flipped it to reveal his scar. He winced, instinctively pulled his arm back, but the jagged line of puckered flesh remained visible. It was her way of telling him she knew more than he gave her credit for, a way of saying that she noticed more than he thought.

“Who is that?” she asked, nodding to the only color on that particular arm—the small golden owl perched on the branch of an otherwise dead-looking tree.

He stared down at that scar as if seeing it for the first time, the mere idea of telling her how his world had fallen apart enough to make his face flush hot. What was done was done, what was gone was gone, but saying it out loud...that would make all of this real. He was terrified of losing hope. He wanted to wake up in his house and realize this had been nothing but a nightmare: Evangeline in the kitchen making eggs and toast, Ryder pushing cast-iron cars along the rug while the TV flickered with Saturday morning cartoons.

Aaron leaned forward, his elbows hitting the curve of his knees. He pressed his hands to his face, pushed his fingers through his hair.

“I killed my son.”

The words eked out of his throat, wavy with pain.

The silence was horrible.

Terrifying.

Unnerving.

He waited for Cheri to get up, to turn away and climb up the embankment behind them and yell back at him to take her back into town. But rather than running away, she dipped her head to look up into Aaron’s downturned face, a hand sliding onto his knee.

“What happened?” she whispered.

A sob welled up in his chest, pressing heavy against his heart and ribs, Ryder’s laughter echoing in his ears.

Ryder running in the park, kicking a soccer ball ahead of him.

Ryder jumping from couch to couch, pretending the rug was lava.

Aaron holding him in the hospital for the first time, having carefully printed the name RYDER ISAAC HOLBROOK onto paperwork, somehow having convinced Evangeline to agree to a name Aaron hadn’t been able to shake, drawn to it by some inexplicable force.

Aaron tried to regain his composure, but the more he fought against the sadness the more he wanted to scream, tear his hair out, run into the lake ahead of them, and breathe water until he drowned.

What had he done that had been so terrible?

What crime had he committed that had deemed him worthy of this pain?

What made him so wicked, so fucking evil, to deserve this life of misery?

“Stop,” Cheri told him, as if somehow able to hear his self-deprecating thoughts. She pulled his palms away from his face, his hands trapped in hers. “You haven’t talked to anybody about this, have you?”

Aaron weakly shook his head. The people who mattered already knew: Cooper and the guys at work, Evangeline and her family—a family he had thought was his, too, until they no longer were.

“Was there an accident?”

The impact.

Screeching metal against asphalt.

Another jolt when the car hit a streetlight.

Cooper murmuring beneath his breath that the car had to be pried away from the pole because it had literally wrapped itself around it.

Let’s not talk about it, Cooper often said. Let’s just forget it. At least you’re okay.

“Yes.” The single syllable croaked out of Aaron’s throat, parched, forlorn.

Cheri looked down, her hands squeezing his in reassurance.

He held his breath, hoping to God she wouldn’t say what she was thinking.

But you’re still alive. It could have been worse.

Not sure whether he could handle another at-least-you-made-it speech.

He knew it was coming—the way she pulled in a breath—but she exhaled it rather than saying a word, and Aaron was caught off guard by the emotion that gouged his chest. He had expected to feel relief, but all that came was an inexorable wave of grief, a heavy loneliness that made him feel emptier than it ever had. He had survived the accident, but he’d allowed the tragedy to erase him anyway.

“And your wife?” she asked, her words hushed in the surrounding quiet.

“I can’t cope, and she can’t watch me fall.”

Cheri’s face twisted with sadness. She reached out, dared to press her palm against his cheek.

“I don’t want to be this way,” he said. “I don’t know if I even care whether or not she takes me back anymore, I just...I can’t be like this. I can’t *stay* like this. I feel like I’m dying all over again. I just want things to be okay again. I want to be able to sleep.”

She breathed out a sigh, stared down at the sand between them, fell into an elongated silence as she processed his confession. They sat that way for what felt like hours, when, without the least bit of warning, she stood, abandoning her shoes and her ICEE cup on the bank. For a moment he was sure she was making her retreat, but rather than walking back in the direction of the car, she moved toward the water instead.

“Come on,” she said, catching her shirt by its hem and tugging it over her head.

Aaron watched her strip, and despite his heartache, the thud of his pulse shifted from his chest to the space between his legs. The sun caught the honey glow of her shoulders as she wiggled out of her jeans. Her underwear was pale pink and lace trimmed, tiny cherries printed on creamy cotton fabric. Those cherries palpitated his heart, a pang of homesickness shooting him straight through the center of the chest. Cherries had been Evangeline’s thing, something he’d discovered long after Boone County was nothing but a bad memory. He’d forgotten that Cheri Miller was the original cherry girl until right then—Cheri with her lip gloss, with her favorite candy flavor, with the color of her hair.

He stared at the curve of Cheri’s back, and despite the throbbing in his groin, he felt on the verge of panic because this wasn’t supposed to happen, it wasn’t supposed to be like this. Miles. Evangeline. Ironwood and playing house. Buying ice cream with pocket change. Kissing among the trees.

She unclasped her bra and let it fall to the shore.

Aaron struggled for breath, somehow already in that lake, gulping water, twisting, drowning, grasping for the surface he’d never reach.

Hooking her thumbs under the band of her underwear, Cheri paused, as if considering one final time, and then pushed them below the curve of her backside. Naked, she stepped into Bull Shoals, ripples radiating out across the lake's mirrored surface, her skin glinting in the afternoon light. She waded in until nothing but her head was left, the past twenty-one years unraveling before him into little more than a boyish yearning mingled with fear.

She watched him from a distance, waiting for him to follow.

Stifling his anxiety, he did. He had to.

Baptism, he thought. *The atonement of my sins*.

He peeled off his clothing and swam out to her.

Their limbs tangled together, hands dragging across bare skin. Legs around his waist. Their mouths centimeters apart.

And then she whispered against his ear—"I've always loved you, Aaron. My heart has always been yours."

His heart swelled, threatening to crack open his chest, to tear him from rib to rib. Hearing those words was as overwhelming as it was serene—the idea that someone could love him, could accept him even after what he'd done. And yet he caught himself wishing that those words had come from someone else, someone who he missed despite all the hurt she'd caused, despite all the rage that had collected on his insides, petrifying his heart.

Cheri melted against him as they moved beneath the water, her fingernails biting into his back, her head tilted toward the sky as if searching for God. But there was no God. There was no faith. No mercy, forgiveness, or love. There was only all-consuming anger that burned so hot it left nothing but grief-stricken devastation in its wake. So hot that it left Aaron a hollow shell of the man he had once been. Empty like a forgotten house. Terminal like a dead-end street.

Afterward, she kissed him on the mouth, the shoulder, the neck, then drifted away from him and toward the shore. He remained in the water while she lay out on the sand, the sun burning water from her skin.

When he finally surfaced from the lake, he avoided looking at her—diverting his gaze to the trees, to the shore, to the splendor of nature or whatever that forced-calm expression would lead her to believe. She sat up, and he nearly jumped when her finger drifted down the scar along his left arm, looking up at him—Venus without her shell. She looked

expectant, waiting for him to say something akin to how, now that he knew she loved him, he could forget Evangeline, forget his old life, replace it with something fresh and move on, be happy, be whole again.

“We should probably go,” he said.

Cheri’s expression wavered—bated breath shifting to apprehension shifting to disappointment. She tried to force a smile, but her disenchantment was impossible to miss. Aaron had said the wrong thing because he couldn’t tell her what she wanted to hear. She turned away from him as she dressed, tugged on her underwear, and brushed sand from the backs of her thighs.

Tossing her hair forward, she exposed her back to him, her elbows jutting out in sharp angles as she worked on the clasp of her bra. Aaron narrowed his eyes when he spotted the patch of jet-black hair at the nape of her neck, so black against bright red it looked oily, iridescent as it shifted from sable to emerald to blue in the light.

Aaron’s heart tripped over its own beat. Shoving sandy feet into his sneakers, he gave himself a little more distance—just enough to get a better look. Cheri tossed her hair back, her hair unfurling like inky black scarves out of a magician’s sleeve, hard quills jutting out of her arms, pinfeathers already sprouting greasy black feathers from their cuticle casings.

Aaron stumbled backward, nearly tripping over his own feet.

“Ryder?” She looked over her shoulder at him, confused.

Aaron’s heart stopped.

Cheri’s hair was the color of cranberries, just as it had always been, her arms milk-white and smooth.

“What did you say?” he asked, nearly squeaking out the words.

“I just...” She shook her head, looking unsure. “Your name. What’s wrong?”

“You said Ryder,” he whispered.

He had heard her.

He had *heard* her.

Cheri stared at him, bewildered, disturbed.

“Was that his name?” she asked. “Ryder?”

He turned away from her, a hand pressed over his face, his teeth clenched.

“Aaron, I swear I didn’t...” She hesitated. “Maybe we’re taking this all too fast. I just want to make it okay.”

A spark of resentment flared inside him. The moment her hand slid onto his shoulder, his anger erupted into full-on hostility. He veered around, misguided rage bubbling up to the surface. Cheri took a backward step, startled by his mask of indignation.

“You can’t make it *okay*,” he snapped, immediately regretting it. He squeezed his eyes shut and looked away, shook his head, muttered, “I’m sorry.”

There was a long, drawn-out silence. A flock of starlings ebbed and flowed in the distance, the murmur a fluid shadow that twisted like ribbon against a pale blue sky.

Aaron wanted to scream at those birds, to beat his fists against his arms and legs and pummel out the rage. He was a time bomb—waiting to go off on anyone who dared get too close, who had the audacity to tell him things would ever be right again, to suggest that they could help him find that peace of mind.

“Is that why you’re here?” she asked after a moment, her mouth drawn down in distress. “You want to drown in your sorrows out here, all by yourself?”

When he didn’t answer, she turned away, silently sweeping the rest of her clothes off the sand. She was right—he’d die alone. He’d push away everyone who could make it better. He’d fold beneath the weight of his own misery, the barrel of a gun cold and acrid against his tongue.

He’d made a mistake, but he could still make it right.

“Wait,” he said, but nearly fell backward when Cheri turned to look at him, her mouth twisted in a ghastly leer, her eyes veiled by a scrim of milky sclera and her teeth full of blood.

Aaron yelled, his eyes wide, disbelieving. He turned away, rushing up the embankment like a lunatic; that flock of starlings coming in close, sweeping in as though ready to dive-bomb them both before turning mid-flight and veering back up into the sky.

She yelled after him. “Aaron, wait!” but he was already up the hill. When he dared look over his shoulder, he saw her wobbling up the first few feet of the grade, stumbling as she helped herself along with her hands. She looked helpless, probably afraid to be left behind, her hair

flying around her face in damp strands, her expression a mask of wounded confusion. Finally catching up to him at the car, she stared at him for what felt like an eon, and when he didn't say anything, she silently slid into the car and gently closed the door.

Fourteen

Cheri stared out the window as she and Aaron drove back into town. Watching the mile markers fly by outside her window, she bit back her tears. She didn't want this to feel like a mistake, but there was something genuinely broken inside the man sitting next to her. He needed help, and she thought about reaching out to him, touching his hand to let him know that she wasn't angry, just confused, but she couldn't gather up the courage.

Pulling into the gas station, she saw her Thunderbird parked along the side of the convenience store where she had left it, waiting to take her back to a life she never truly felt was hers. Aaron pulled the e-brake and stared down at his hands. They both sat silently in their seats, Cheri waiting for him to say something, to explain what had happened back at the lake. She had seen it in his eyes—dread, as though somewhere inside his mind the sun had been blotted out by darkness. She watched him wring his hands in his lap, never once turning to face her. He may as well have been wringing her heart, twisting it like wet cloth, wrenching girlish hopes from their long-lived home.

"Aaron." She winced at the sound of her own voice. She had spoken softly, but anything above a whisper was too loud. "I'm worried about you." She looked down to her hands, her wedding band still circling her left-hand ring finger. Pulling in a steadying breath, she exhaled her next few words.

"I'm not angry," she said, though she wondered if she should have been. The way he had jumped back from her, the way he had run from the shore; she'd been terrified that he'd leave her out in the middle of nowhere—it had been a bit much. She swallowed against a lump of emotion.

"Do you regret it?" she asked. "Today, what we did?" It was the only question she needed answered. If it was a yes, she would step aside; let him hope and wait and dream about his wife finding the strength to forgive him for...what? An accident he couldn't have prevented? A death he couldn't have stopped?

"No," he said. That single syllable was hoarse, dry, rimmed with its own brand of masculine determination.

Aaron's reply gave her a little more strength. She squared her shoulders, caught both of his hands in hers, and gave them a squeeze. "I refuse to lose you again, do you understand?"

He nodded faintly, a defeated acceptance.

"I'm just tired," he whispered.

She supposed it could have been at least halfway true. He'd been slaving away on that house without proper food or a decent night's rest, but it still didn't explain the terror that had flashed across his face or the way he had stumbled backward and abandoned her on the sand, but she told herself that understanding everything all at once was impossible. Aaron Holbrook had over two decades of secrets; it would take time to excavate them all.

"I know," she said, deciding to let the strangeness of the past hour go—at least for now. Her fingers drifted in reverse, settling at the back of his neck. Pulling him toward her until they sat forehead to forehead, she closed her eyes as she listened to him breathe. And then she kissed the corner of his mouth and spoke against his skin.

"We'll make it okay. Just don't push me away."

She had no idea what she was up against—depression, no doubt, but there was more. As soon as they leaned away from each other she wanted to touch him again, to keep touching him until he smiled and told her

I'm okay now, Cheri, you fixed me, you did

but she resisted the temptation.

She wanted to tell him she loved him for a second time, but she kept that to herself too.

Gathering herself up, she pulled her purse to her knees and rifled through her bag for her keys. She'd pay a visit to the house later to make sure he was okay, but she had to deal with Miles first. Despite the fact that it made her feel dirty and resentful, she still had to cover her tracks.

"Call me if you need me," she said softly. "I don't turn off my phone."

She waited a beat, hoped for at least a good-bye, but she didn't get one.

As she walked across the parking lot to her awaiting T-bird, she found herself grateful that he hadn't replied. A good-bye from Aaron was something she had never gotten, and it was something she never wanted to receive.

—

Miles had watched Cheri leave. On the phone at the front counter, he had caught her sitting at her desk through the crack in her office door. Her phone had blipped—the familiar sound of a text message, probably from her mother; but rather than rolling her eyes at her phone like she usually did, she smiled instead, swiveled in her seat, and glanced out the window. A moment later he heard the soft *tick-tick-tick* of her typing on her touch screen. There was a jingle of car keys, the sound of the filing cabinet beside her desk opening and closing as she fished out her purse. Miles purposely turned his back to her as she stepped out of her office and across the lobby, pretending to be consumed by his phone call. A second later she was through the front door. Miles watched her climb into her car.

“Can you hold on a minute?” he asked the guy on the other end of the line. He put the receiver down before he heard the customer’s reply.

Cutting across the lobby, he stepped into Cheri’s office. It smelled of her perfume, light and airy like citrus fruit. But there was an overlay of something sweet and red—lip gloss. Miles paused at the window, squinted past the blinds, and watched a Toyota Tercel with Oregon plates pull out of Mr. Ice Cream’s parking lot and tail his wife. Miles calmly walked into the garage and shoved a toolbox full of wrenches off a worktable onto the floor. The guys in the garage stopped what they were doing, looked up at their boss, and ducked beneath car hoods and undercarriages a moment later. Miles’s temper was par for the course, and Miles didn’t give a shit if they saw him upset or not.

It was a slow workday—nobody waiting in the lobby for immediate fixes—so he sent the guys home early and took up residence behind Cheri’s desk.

He texted her just to see if she’d reply: **Where RU?**

She didn’t.

It took her over four hours to return. When she pushed open the office door, she gave a little yelp, startled to see him sitting there. Her hand flew out against her chest and she breathed a little laugh, then gave him a comical scowl.

“You scared me,” she complained. “What are you doing, looking for something?”

It was the only reason Miles went into her office, to look for things: invoices and receipts and lunch and an occasional cigarette. She dropped her purse onto an old office chair beside the door and raised an eyebrow, waiting for a reply.

“Yeah,” he said. “You.”

It was a cinematic thing to say, and it gave him a little thrill to see Cheri’s expression waver. She was trying to keep her expression Zen calm, but he could see the alarm register in her eyes. He had mastered reading the tiny shifts in her face; the way her eyes crinkled at the corners ever so slightly, the way her mouth twitched before blooming into a fake, easy smile.

Cheri smiled and shrugged her shoulders and walked around the desk to the filing cabinet in the corner as though she’d been gone four minutes instead of half a day, and then she glanced over her shoulder, almost sultry, and said, “Well, I’m here now.”

He suddenly wanted to grab her by the shoulders and shove her face-first into that painted cinder block wall.

“Where were you?”

“Get your feet off my desk.”

She slapped his dirty boots with the corner of a manila folder.

“Where were you?” he asked again, affirming that he wasn’t going to let it drop, not the way he let most everything else go—like the way she peered at him when she thought he wasn’t looking, her mouth screwing up as though she’d just eaten something sour; the way she walked out of rooms when he entered them, as though they couldn’t possibly occupy the same space; the way she bitched about his endless hours at the shop, but when he took the time to be at home she simply ignored him, aggravated by everything he said or did.

“I went to Banner’s,” she said. “For cigarettes.”

“I texted you,” he told her.

She blinked at him as if mystified, and he could tell that she was genuinely surprised. What her reaction also meant was that she had been too preoccupied to glance at her phone—Cheri, the woman whose mother teased that she should have her phone surgically attached to the side of her face, hadn’t even noticed she had missed a text.

“That’s weird,” she said. “Nothing came through.”

Except he knew if he checked her phone his text would be there, waiting to be read.

“You know how long you were gone?” he asked.

She rolled her eyes up to the ceiling, checking for moths in the light fixtures.

“Four hours,” he told her.

“What’s the big deal?” She frowned at him. “I ran into a friend.”

A friend.

Miles gritted his teeth. Was that what Aaron was, a friend? Because it sure as hell didn’t look like Cheri had been standing around in the produce department for hours on end. Her hair was different, matted and stringy, like she’d been caught in the rain. There was a swatch of dirt on her pants, right below her ass cheek where she couldn’t see it, and Miles knew better than anyone that Cheri Miller Vaughn did not sit in the dirt.

“Who?” His voice cracked, dry with tension.

That momentary flash of anxiety returned to her face, just for a heartbeat, just long enough to defy her play at innocence.

He pushed away from her desk, bolted up from the swivel chair, and before she could take more than two steps he had her against the wall, her hands pawing at his wrists as he held her by the shoulders. It took every ounce of willpower to not shift them to her neck.

“I want to hear you say it,” he told her, mere inches from her face. “Say his name, Cher.”

“You’re hurting me,” she whispered, her words strained beneath the quick onset of tears.

“But you aren’t hurting *me*?” He gave her a shove before letting her go. “Say his fucking name!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” she screamed back, crying now.

“Really?” He expelled a humorless laugh. “Jesus, *really*? I saw you.”

Cheri shook her head, still denying the whole thing.

“How many people in Ironwood have Oregon plates, Cher?”

She blanched.

He turned away from her and shoved the corner of the desk with his hip. Lingered in the doorway, he considered walking away.

“I work sixty-five hours a week,” he said, surprised by the subtle tremble that accompanied his words. “*Sixty-five hours a week* so you can fuck another guy behind my back.”

Cheri opened her mouth to protest, but she snapped it shut when he shot her a glare.

Don't you dare deny it. Don't you dare tell me I'm dreaming, you stupid cheating bitch.

He stared out the window, feeling like she'd doused him in gasoline and set him ablaze. The momentary silence gave him an iota of pacification, calm slowly creeping into his veins, quelling the indignation that was poisoning him, that had been poisoning him for months.

But then she spoke: “You're wrong.”

She couldn't confess.

“And if you think you can tell me who I can and can't be friends with...”

Cheri cried out when he grabbed her.

She screamed when the back of her head thudded against the wall; screamed again when he reeled back with his fist and punched the bricks just shy of her face, the bones in his hands folding in on themselves before snapping back into place.

“You're fucking crazy!” she howled, ducking beneath his arm, clamoring for her purse. “Don't ever touch me again!”

He could have reached out and grabbed her by the hair, could have pulled her back and slammed her on the ground before pounding her face in, screaming

How could you betray me, how could you defy my fucking love?!

But he let her go.

Sucking in a wheezing breath through his snarl, he let her go.

Because he did love her.

He loved her and she knew it, and maybe this was what they needed—to come back together, this rift needed to tear them apart.

He'd give her a chance to fix it. But if he caught her with Aaron again, the break would never heal.

And to make it even, he'd break Aaron's fucking neck.

Fifteen

The sheets pooled beneath Cheri's shoulders as she dragged her fingernails down Aaron's back. Her hair was a tangle of crimson upon his pillow, and the tip of her tongue left a slick of saliva along the curve of her bottom lip as a purr resonated from the hollow of her throat. She caught his wrists and shifted her weight, rolled on top of him and arched her back, her neck craning like an exotic bird. Aaron's fingers bit into the curve of her thighs, and when her head lolled forward, the cascade of deep red was replaced by iridescent black that shifted in the light—hints of metallic blues and greens playing within that slick Cimmerian hue.

He blinked up at her, a noxious swirl of confusion coiling inside his chest. Cheri exhaled a moan as her nails dug into his shoulders. Aaron shut his eyes, blotting out her sudden change in appearance, his hands slithering up her bare sides as he moved with her. But the air caught in his throat when her fingers stabbed into his skin, jabbing down so hard they buried themselves up to the first knuckle in his flesh. His eyes grew wide when he saw her hands—no longer hands but scaly four-pronged feet.

Aaron tried to scramble out from under her, the bedsheets suddenly gritty with damp lake sand, but she held him down, her moans replaced by belabored cries of agony as something rippled just beneath her skin. Her flesh raised up in grotesquely pronounced goose bumps. For the briefest of moments the girl above him looked like a reptile, thrashing as if trying to get away, cemented in place by the claws she'd sunk into his shoulders. Her screams reached a fevered pitch as the bumps of her skin sprouted hard, flesh-covered points that laid flat against her flesh. Black, feathery tufts poked out from beyond the hard cuticle that held the pins in place. Her spine elongated, the needle-like probes growing impossibly long along the undersides of her arms.

Aaron thrashed beneath her as her face shifted shape, her nose and mouth fusing together, protruding outward into a beak; a terrifying mask, like the bird doctor of the plagues. She exhaled an ear-piercing squawk, reeling back as if to peck him straight through, but he coiled his legs against his chest and shoved her away with his feet. Her talons ripped from his skin, blood surging from his shoulders. Frantically feeling the shore around him, Aaron's fingers caught the edge of a large rock. The

bird screeched as he brought his arm around in an arch, roundhousing the monstrosity against the side of the head, stone in hand.

The thing fell back, and Aaron threw himself at it, pinning it down. It tried to flap its wings, its beak open wide as it snapped at his face. Aaron reeled back and screamed, smashing the rock against the bird's massive skull. He pulled back again, and again, and again until he was bludgeoning nothing but pulp and fragments of bone.

When the bird was dead, Aaron slowly looked up at his surroundings. The shore was the dusty floor of his living room. The monstrous bird before him was nothing but an ordinary raven.

Moving away from the carnage, he stared down at his bloodied, feather-covered hands. They were small, a boy's hands, hands that twitched as he

bolted upright, his book sliding off his chest and tumbling to the bedroom floor. His uncle Fletcher's voice reverberated against the inside of his skull.

We should cut the damn trees down.

Despite the darkness, the birds still tittered outside his window. There were hundreds of them now, dozens per tree. It was as though the things didn't sleep, like there were too many of them—feathers tangled together, beaks biting and snapping, feet clawing, wings beating in the breeze.

Aaron pressed his hands over his face, forcing the vision of that massive bird from his mind. He was getting used to the dreams, learning how to ignore them rather than letting them seize up his heart. The visions were decidedly better than the nightmares he'd suffered in Portland—the same dream playing over and over again on a loop: the crush of metal, the splintering of glass. He'd take giant birds over car accidents any night of the week, because giant birds and insane boys and children being pushed out of windows didn't make sense. As long as it wasn't Ryder, he could push it to the back of his mind.

Rubbing his eyes, he twisted upon the mattress and let his feet hit the ground. The coolness of the floorboards felt good on his feet: soothing, grounding, reminding him that despite the nightmares in his head, despite the nightmare that had become his life, he was still alive.

Somehow he was still okay.

I've always loved you...

That whisper made his heart ache. He only wished the voice had been Evangeline's, but perhaps it was a sign.

Time to move on, he told himself. Time to let go.

It had been too long; it had hurt too much. He wanted to feel better, and because Cheri wanted the same thing for him, somehow that made things feel all right.

Pushing his fingers through his hair, he exhaled a breath and looked across the darkness of the room to his door. But rather than sliding off the bed and heading to the bathroom for a quick gulp of water, he stared at the space beneath the door as his heart sputtered to a stop.

The moonlight shifted across the hardwood in a pale blue glow, darkness cutting through it in two distinct spots—spots where someone's feet blocked the light.

The surge of adrenaline made him nauseous.

He was sure he was going to vomit as he slid to the ground, his knees whispering against the floorboards, his right arm jabbing into the shadows beneath the bed. His hand grazed the hard plastic of the gun case, pulling the box into view, but the gun wasn't there. Sudden realization hit him hard: he'd left it downstairs, he'd left the fucking thing on the coffee table for any trespasser to use against him.

He scrambled to his feet.

The shadow that lurked just beyond the door turned and moved, as if ready to run.

Aaron didn't have a weapon, but he found himself rushing to the door regardless.

No you don't.

If the kid was inside the house, this was Aaron's chance to catch him, to end this bullshit once and for all.

Aaron yanked open the door, a gasp of surprise tumbling from his throat. He had expected to see what he always saw—an empty hallway, nothing but his imagination playing tricks. But this time the kid was there.

Standing at the top of the stairs, the boy turned his head to face Aaron in a snap. The kid gave Aaron a sickening smile, a baseball bat hanging heavy from his right hand, gently tapping the toe of his shoe.

Aaron struggled for words, but the kid didn't give him time to think. He leaped down the steps, taking the risers three by three. He paused long

enough to give Aaron time to scramble to the top step, grinning up at him from the middle of the staircase, that baseball bat thump thump thumping against the edge of the stair.

Aaron's breath hitched in his throat.

He hesitated, though he didn't know exactly why.

There was something about the kid's smile that made his blood reverse its current, something about the way he was waiting to be caught, that turned Aaron's guts inside out. But he couldn't just stand there open-mouthed and soundless. This was his house now, his property, his kingdom of misery.

Aaron took a slow downward step, his eyes fixed on the kid who was patiently waiting for him to give chase. The boy mimicked Aaron's step by taking a step down as well, that baseball bat continuing to thump thump thump like a metronome. A second step resulted in the same response, the distance between them remaining constant, steadfast. The kid slowly drew the rounded tip of the baseball bat up the wall in a delicate arc, choked up on the handle without taking his eyes off of Aaron's face, and with a grimace that was balanced between amusement and disgust, he reeled back and swung at the air.

The bat smashed against the wall in a seemingly aimless act of aggression. It tore into Edie's wallpaper and knocked a framed picture to the floor. The glass shattered in its frame, Aunt Edie and Uncle Fletcher smiling up at Aaron from next to his feet.

Suddenly, all Aaron's rage came flooding back. His muscles tensed and his hands curled into fists.

The kid cocked his head toward his right ear, as if sensing Aaron's ire. But his grin only grew wider, his eyes flashing with spite. And just as Aaron considered dashing back to his bedroom and calling the cops, the kid hissed an insult into the silence.

I fucked your mother, and now she's burning in hell.

Something snapped within Aaron's chest.

Had that been real? Had the kid actually said that, or had he dreamed it?

Somehow, it didn't matter. The last thread of Aaron's self-restraint unraveled. He let out a yell and rushed down the stairs.

The kid whooped and leapt to the ground floor, swung the bat and smacked the top of the newel post, sending the wooden ball sailing into the front room like an impromptu home run.

Aaron caught the bat, gave it a vicious twist, and wrenched it out of the boy's hands. Not expecting the move, the kid twisted with it and stumbled backward, holding his hands up to protect himself from Aaron's swing. But Aaron kept swinging—even when he caught the kid's hand with the tip of the bat, he swung again; swung when the boy toppled over, scrambling away from him on hands and knees; reeled back after connecting with the little shit's ribs and swung for a fourth time, bringing the bat down hard against his collarbone, tasting blood when he heard bones snap.

The boy screamed as Aaron bludgeoned him from above, his desperate cries for help dissipating into nothing more than wet gurgles, blood bubbling up from between his lips. Drunk on his own rage, Aaron continued to bring the bat down against the kid's head, the quiet of the house resonating with sloppy meatpacking thuds—steady, like the tick of a metronome.

Thwack. Thwack. Thwack.

When the bat slid from Aaron's hands and hit the floor, all that was left of the boy was a gory bloom of red—a meat flower with arms and legs for leaves. Aaron backed away from the body, his eyes wide with horror.

I killed him.

His breaths came in loud, disbelieving gasps.

I KILLED HIM.

He twisted away from the body, stared down the hall and into the kitchen, his mind reeling.

Temporary insanity.

He began to move through the hallway.

I'm fucking crazy.

Stopped to catch himself against the wall.

Doubling over, he waited for bile to bubble up his throat, waited for the sick to come spewing forth onto the floor, the wall, his bare feet.

A sob tore its way out of his chest, amplified in the silence, echoing through empty rooms, joined by soft laughter from the front room. Aaron

spun around to see where the laughter had come from, his eyes impossibly wide, his pulse thudding in his ears.

The boy was crouched at the foot of the stairs.

That sinister grin plastered across his face.

He held out his hands, hooked his thumbs together, and flapped his palms like a shadow puppet, then pivoted on the soles of his shoes and darted toward the locked front door.

When Aaron finally gathered up the courage to stagger to the window, he saw the kid running through the weeds of the yard, heading toward the trees that surrounded the house.

He turned away, felt like he was floating as his gaze settled upon the camcorder that sat innocuously upon the coffee table. A vague sense of clarity crystallized within his veins.

He launched himself forward, nearly knocking the device to the floor as he fumbled for it, the relentless hammering of his pulse making him sick. His chest heaved as he pressed PLAY, reviewing it in triple-time from the moment he had arrived in Ironwood, watching the images for something, anything that would make sense.

Footage of the house.

Of Ironwood proper.

Of Bennie's Burgers and the hum of cicadas.

Stopping on the most recent scene, he watched himself on the small screen, the Aaron of a few days ago dropping onto the couch, looking tired, staring into the camera before shoving his hands through his hair.

There's no silence here.

He slowly lowered himself onto the couch, the camcorder balanced in one hand while the other dug into the upholstery. It was strange how different he looked even to himself, forever plagued by the unseen. The man on the screen released a sigh.

It has to be in my head.

Aaron's eyes darted from the camcorder to the hall, waiting for that shadow to resurface.

He swallowed against the possibility; still convinced that the appearance of Ryder's name couldn't possibly be arbitrary. Ryder was part of this. But maybe if Ryder could reach out to him from beyond the grave,

so could someone else. Someone wicked. Someone evil. Someone like the kid who'd been tormenting him from day one.

The man on the screen suddenly looked up at a distant noise. He stood, the camera focusing in on the knees of his jeans. It continued to record as the star of the show moved out of frame.

The camcorder picked up the subtle creaking of floorboards beneath Aaron's weight.

It picked up the whine of the bottom step of the stairs, focused, then refocused on the crocheted blanket on the back of the sofa. Edie's circus blanket; her pride and joy.

Aaron's stomach twisted in on itself, leaving him to choke on air.

The picture went fuzzy, then fixed onto the back wall of the living room.

There was a shadow in one of the corners, one that had been there the entire time.

At first it had looked like nothing but a trick of the light—darkness thrown against the wall by lamplight hitting furniture at weird angles, reflecting off the floor—but the shadow was moving now, growing darker, more pronounced, finding shape in the formless shade.

The thing drifted forward—short, small, a kid.

Aaron mewed deep in his throat, a muffled cry of longing.

Let it be him.

He swore he could see Ryder's familiar Big Bird shirt.

Please God, let it be him.

Aaron leaned in, his eyes wide, his breath exhaled and forgotten, his fingers clasped around the camera in front of him, teeth clenched in expectation.

The picture on the screen flickered like bad reception on an old TV, threatening to cut out completely.

A sinister grin cut through the darkness and the kid stepped forward, his hands held out before him, dappled with something dark, something that at first looked like ink but became clearer the closer it came.

Feathers.

Black feathers glinting in the dim light as the boy leaned forward.

Tipped his chin down to his chest.

And *sneered*.

Sixteen

Stepping into Banner Goods, Aaron searched the front of the store for anyone who could help him.

"I need to see Eric Banner," he told the kid at the closest checkout counter—a bagger more than likely working a summer shift.

The blotchy-faced teen didn't bother looking up from his task of refilling a plastic bag stand—probably for the better, because if Aaron looked the way he felt, there was no doubt the kid would have backed away with his hands held aloft.

Aaron felt like hell—exhausted, toeing the line of insanity. Terrified to spend another night in that house, he had driven the ten miles it took to get into town and pulled into a Laundromat parking lot facing the town square. It was where he sat for the rest of the night, slowly rocking himself into the closest thing he could come to calm, waiting for morning, staring over the curve of the steering wheel at the giant lumberjack with the wooden smile—the only constant in a nowhere, phantom town.

"Do you have an appointment?" the bagger asked.

The question only pushed Aaron closer to the outer edges of self-control.

He stared at the bagger with a bewildered expression, then shook his head, waiting for the punch line.

"You're kidding, right?"

The kid finally looked up from what he was doing, looking like he was ready to shoot off some snappy comeback, but his expression quickly shifted from brassy to hesitant. Aaron could see it on his face; the bag boy had developed the ability to sniff out a patron-on-the-edge before a scene could occur. From the way the bagger was looking at him, Aaron could tell he knew better than to push.

"I know he's here," Aaron said, the volume of his voice going up a notch. "So go get him."

"I..." The bagger hesitated, shot a look over his shoulder to the remaining registers before looking back to the lunatic customer before him. "I can't do that, sir. He's in a meeting."

Aaron clenched his jaw, his hands curling into fists. He'd never been the type to anger quickly, and the flash of indignation left him feeling

unlike himself—a stranger in a body that was no longer his.

“He’s the manager of a goddamn grocery store,” Aaron snapped. “Not the President of the United fucking States.”

Heads turned their way.

A gasp from someone in line.

Narrowed eyes from a few cashiers.

He recognized one of the patrons—the waitress from the Blue Ox, her expression pulled into a taut look of concerned dismay.

Someone’s grandma—rifling through a pocketbook full of coupons—shot Aaron a hellfire glare.

I fucked your mother, Aaron thought. And now she’s burning in hell.

The bagger’s face bloomed bright red, his fading acne scars making him look like a pink Dalmatian, and for a second—even in his heightened state of ragged agitation—Aaron felt like a dick. He couldn’t remember the last time he blew up on someone, let alone someone he didn’t know. Had he ever? Was this a milestone? Yet another freak occurrence to tack on to a growing list? Paranormal activity: check. Turning into King’s Jack Torrance: *I’m gonna bash your brains in...*

“Look,” Aaron said, trying like hell to steady his tone. “I’m sorry.”

Bullshit.

“I didn’t mean to snap.”

I should tear you limb from limb.

“But I need to see Eric Banner. Like, now.”

Before I lock you in here, set this entire place on fire, stand outside the double glass doors, and watch you burn to death.

“So why don’t you do me a favor and go get him before I lose my goddamn mind?”

It hadn’t been meant as a threat, but it certainly came out sounding like one.

The bag boy backed away, recognizing that he was in over his head. He nodded cautiously and speed-walked to a cashier wearing a sparkly badge—a brick of a woman with salt-and-pepper hair who looked as joyless as Aaron felt. The woman snapped a command at the boy and he jogged down an aisle toward the back of the store.

The young cashier who had helped Aaron on his first visit to Banner’s glanced over her shoulder at him, her high ponytail bobbing, her mouth

pulled into a frown. The entire store was staring at him—the guy with the Einstein hair and the bloodshot eyes, the wrinkled clothes and misfit tattoos. All he needed was a handgun to wag over his head. Or maybe a bomb to strap to his chest.

He stepped outside, hovering just beyond the sliding glass doors.

Eric appeared beside him a few minutes later, blinking at the fact that the psychopath described to him was one of his oldest friends, not the ax murderer or venomous coupon clipper he had probably expected.

“What the hell?” he asked, his expression terse. “The kid said there was a crazy person at the front of the store.”

“There was,” Aaron said. “I’m it.”

A nervous laugh punched its way out of his throat, startling Eric into a worried stare.

“...are you okay?” he asked. “I mean, you look...” Eric hesitated. “You look like you just dropped a shitload of acid or something.”

“I’m not okay,” he said. “Not in the slightest. I need to talk.”

Eric squinted against the sun, his red polo making Aaron more edgy than he already was. “I was in an interview. I have another one in ten minutes. One of our cashiers decided to screw us and quit without notice.”

Aaron shoved his fingers through his hair, looked up at the sky, and let his hand fall back to his hip. “Look, I know this is cutting into your schedule, but do me a goddamn favor, okay?”

“Can we do it later? After noon?” Eric asked.

“*Eric.*” The name left Aaron’s throat in a rush of air, punctuated by a sense of urgency that made Eric’s mouth snap shut.

A moment later Eric was nodding, suddenly convinced. “I need half an hour, okay?”

“Fine.”

“Meet me at the Ox. I haven’t eaten breakfast.”

“This isn’t appropriate diner conversation,” Aaron protested, but Eric’s expression assured him that he’d already bent to Aaron’s will enough. “Okay,” he murmured. “The Ox. Thirty minutes.”

Eric narrowed his eyes and stepped backward, the double doors yawning open behind him, a blast of refrigerated air wafting out into the summer heat. He gave Aaron a dubious look, then pivoted on the soles of his shoes and stepped back inside the store.

“Can I get you something to drink?”

The waitress was the same one he’d seen at Banner’s fifteen minutes earlier, the same one who had served him chocolate chip pancakes on his first morning in town. Her name tag read HAZEL. She gave him a wary smile and slid two menus onto the window-side table, Aaron trying to look normal rather than tweaked out of his skull.

He attempted to smile in return but it felt wrong on his face.

He didn’t dare look her in the eye.

“Coffee,” he said, his attention riveted to the kid standing across the street—wild black hair, coveralls, and a red-trimmed name patch catching the morning sun.

“You want to order now or wait for your friend?”

Aaron tore his gaze away from the kid who was ruining his life—the *thing* that was screwing with him; delusion, hallucination, whatever the fuck it was—shoved his hands beneath the table, and squeezed them between his knees. “I’ll wait.”

“All right,” she said, hesitated as if about to say something, then turned away to fetch his drink.

As soon as the waitress left him, he closed his eyes and took a breath, trying like hell to not jump out of that booth and start clawing his way out of his own skin. A few patrons were watching him, proof enough that he looked insane, and why not? He *was* crazy. Was this what it felt like to lose your mind?

Hazel returned a minute later, slid a fresh cup of coffee in front of him, and gave him a wary look. “You okay, sugar?”

He nodded without a word.

I’M FINE.

“I’ll check on you in a few minutes.” She scrutinized her other tables, but not before allowing her smile to nervously bend down at the corners.

Aaron cupped his hands around the warm mug, bent down to the table to take a sip off the brimming top, and reached for a little white bucket of nondairy creamer from next to the sugar caddy. He tried to keep from looking across the street, knowing without having to see him, that that goddamn kid

ghost, phantom, poltergeist, demon
was still there, still watching him,

waiting for his body count.

He fumbled the creamer, dropped the entire contents and packaging into his coffee as it slipped from his trembling fingers. Fishing it out, he tore the corner off a packet of Splenda, then another, *three, four, five*, only realizing how many he'd stirred in after the empty packets came into focus the way shadows came into focus, revealing themselves in the darkness, watching, waiting, knowing, leering.

His gaze snapped to the window—just for half a second,
half a second,
just to check.

The kid wasn't on the opposite side of the street anymore. He was in the diner's parking lot, standing on a parking curb almost exactly the way he had at the truck stop. Aaron clamped his eyes shut—

don't look

—his teeth chattering inside his mouth—

it isn't real

—his entire body trembling beneath his clothes.

He swallowed against the lump in his throat, looked again only to see a palm hit the window, mere centimeters of glass separating him from the outside world.

He jumped, a strained mew sliding from his lungs, but it was only Eric trying to be funny, not having the slightest clue that he'd just scared the shit out of someone on the brink of madness.

Eric stepped inside the diner, the little bell at the corner of the door marking his entrance, giving an angel its wings. He made a beeline for Aaron's booth, both intrigued and a little worried. Aaron looked like hell since he'd arrived in town, but this was a whole new level of not looking good. It seemed impossible, but Eric swore Aaron looked even worse now than he had thirty minutes before. It was the lighting. Had to be.

Sliding into the booth, Eric frowned at his friend; and when Aaron failed to look up from his hands, he grabbed a menu, inspected it momentarily, placed it back on to the table, and cleared his throat.

"Okay, what's wrong?" he asked.

Aaron opened his mouth as if to speak, but snapped it shut as soon as the waitress approached.

“Heya, Hazel,” Eric greeted.

“Morning, sweetie. How’ve you been?”

“Can’t complain.” He shrugged. “You?”

“Busy as always, honey. You boys ready to order?”

“The usual for me,” Eric told her, then shot Aaron a glance.

“I’m not hungry,” Aaron murmured.

“He’s not hungry,” Eric echoed, offering the woman he’d known for the better part of his life an apologetic smile.

Hazel glanced to Aaron in a maternal sort of way. “You sure you don’t want anything, darlin’?”

“Yeah,” Aaron replied. “Thanks.”

“I’ll leave a menu just in case.” Hazel plucked up one of the menus, left the other where it was. “Back with your coffee and OJ in a jiff,” she told Eric, then pivoted on the soles of her therapeutic shoes.

Eric watched Aaron pull his coffee toward himself like a child pulling a favorite toy or a blanket closer in search of comfort.

“You don’t remember Hazel Murphy?” he asked after a moment.

Aaron shook his head at his mug.

“She and Edie used to be close,” Eric said, trying to jog Aaron’s memory. “Them two and my mom would always get tipsy at my parents’ Christmas parties. Hazel was the one who nearly tipped over our Christmas tree.”

Nothing.

Eric furrowed his eyebrows and leaned back, allowing his attention to settle on his friend. “So,” he said, waiting a beat to see if Aaron would pick up the conversational slack. When he didn’t, Eric filled the space between them with the obligatory question: “What’s up?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know.”

“I think I might be losing my mind.”

“Is this about the crow?” Eric asked. “Because it’s really not that big a deal. Birds fly into the store windows all the—”

“It’s not about the crow.”

Eric pressed his lips together in a tight line, shifted in the booth seat, waited to see if Aaron would continue.

He didn’t.

“Then what, the vandalism?”

“The house.” Aaron spoke beneath his breath.

“The house,” Eric repeated, leaned forward on his elbows, pressed his knuckles against his mouth. Finally, he sighed and let his hand fall to the tabletop. “Look, I didn’t mean for those stories to freak you out. If I had known they would screw with you so bad...”

“They didn’t screw with me,” Aaron snapped, his voice a little too loud.

Eric blinked.

Hazel returned at precisely the wrong moment, setting Eric’s coffee and juice in front of him before giving him a private look. *Is everything okay?* Eric nodded and took a sip of OJ, but the truth of it was, he wasn’t sure if things were okay or not; and the longer he sat there, he wasn’t sure he *wanted* to know what was wrong.

Contemplating indifference made him feel like an asshole—he and Aaron had been best friends, after all—but that had been a long time ago. Yes, Eric had been thrilled to see him again. He had been bowled over, hardly able to believe that a ghost from such a distant past could simply reappear without warning, but he had expected drinking and revelry and shooting the shit around a bonfire. He hadn’t expected his childhood friend to be fine one moment and coming apart at the seams the next.

Aaron shoved his fingers through his hair and stared out the window. He looked harried, on the edge.

“Maybe you were right,” Eric said after Hazel abandoned them for another table. “Maybe we should do this somewhere else. We can go back out to Stonehenge after my shift. I’ll bring some of that fancy microbrew you like. Or I can swing by your place...”

“That’s impossible.”

“What is?” Eric shook his head, not getting it.

“I’m not going back there,” Aaron said. “I’m done.”

“Done renovating?”

“Done, period.”

Eric opened his mouth, hesitated as he searched for the right words, then sighed and slumped in his seat. “You’re totally freaking me out,” he admitted. “I’m tempted to drop you off at the clinic so you don’t start

picking people off.” He meant it as a joke, but Aaron didn’t smile, and Eric squirmed in his booth seat, suddenly uncomfortable.

Aaron leaned forward, his chest flush with the edge of the table, his eyes fixed on Eric’s face. “I’m *seeing* things.”

Eric didn’t say anything for a moment, only stared into Aaron’s face, unsure whether to call his bluff or take him seriously. Eventually, he managed a two-word response.

“Like hallucinations?”

“Like in my dreams,” Aaron murmured so other tables wouldn’t overhear. “And then in real life, manifested.”

“What?” Eric actually cracked a grin, momentarily convinced this whole thing was an elaborate prank. *Good one*, he thought. *Let’s see just how gullible the NAPS guy is*. But his smile faded when Aaron didn’t smile back. “Wait.” He looked around to see whether anyone was overhearing this, then looked back to his friend, dubious. “You’re being serious?”

“I thought I was just going nuts. But last night...” Aaron stared down at his cooling coffee, weighing his words. “I’ve been seeing this kid, that kid I told you about...”

“Fuck that kid,” Eric murmured. He didn’t see what the big deal was. Kids were everywhere. It was summertime. They were out of school, crawling through the trees, exploring and causing trouble, doing what kids did.

“Yeah, except I don’t know if he’s actually real.”

Eric stared, *really* stared at the guy sitting across from him, and again, he felt like at any moment he’d be caught on *Candid Camera*. He and Aaron had loved that show. They had run around town trying to prank total strangers for an entire summer outside his dad’s store. They had gotten into the biggest trouble of their lives when Eric had come up with the brilliant idea of taking eggs up onto Banner’s roof. *Bombs away!* His pop had nearly murdered him; grounded for life, all because Mrs. Treadwell had gotten some egg on her brand-new JCPenney shoes.

“Aaron, I...”

“There’s a kid wandering around on my property, Eric. How did he get there? Why is he there at all?”

“He lives on your street?” It was a logical conclusion. “I mean, I get it, Old Mill looks abandoned, but people have been hit hard around here. The job market keeps getting worse and worse. Some people don’t have money for food, let alone cash to fork over to a bank.”

Aaron looked pained, as though Eric’s logic was physically hurting him, but Eric couldn’t help it. This was crazy. This was *insane*.

“Just last year there was a whole thing on the news about squatters and how bad that sort of thing is getting, especially in small towns like this. Entire families just pick an abandoned house and live in it. No heat, no lights, no water, but it’s better than the street.”

“I’m the only house on that street that’s occupied,” Aaron murmured.

“You can’t know that for sure.”

“I’m telling you, they’re empty.”

“I doubt it. Whoever that kid is, he’s probably just bored. There’s nothing to do out there, he wanders into your yard because you’re new and interesting and you live in *the* house.”

“The haunted house,” Aaron said flatly.

Eric went silent, not sure whether to insist the house wasn’t haunted, or whether to do the NAPS thing and preserve at least some possibility that it was.

“He came inside.”

Eric froze mid-sip, his glass of orange juice still pressed to his bottom lip.

“I saw a shadow shift beneath my bedroom door, like someone was standing there, thinking about opening it or waiting for me to notice. When I got up to see what it was, that little fucker was standing at the top of the stairs, waiting.”

“Holy shit. He was just...just *standing* there?”

“He had my old baseball bat,” Aaron said. “Except that I don’t know how he got it, because that baseball bat was in my room, and I had been sleeping *in my room* with the door closed. The door squeaks. I would have heard him if he had come inside to get it. But that didn’t matter. He still had it. He hadn’t come in and somehow *he still had it*.”

“What the hell did he want with the baseball bat?”

Aaron shook his head.

“What?” Eric pressed. “Did he assault you with it?”

Aaron breathed out what sounded like an aggravated sigh, as if incensed by the mere memory of it. “I followed him downstairs, and I grabbed the bat. I wrenched it out of his fucking hands and it was, like, as soon as I touched it I was so pissed...so pissed about everything that had happened up until now.”

Eric swallowed, not liking where this was going. Suddenly, a worst-case scenario flashed through his head. Aaron had come to Banner’s looking like a wild man because Aaron had killed a boy. He had *brained* him, and now he was about to ask Eric to come back home with him and help dispose of the body, to help throw him into the woods the way he had disposed of that goddamn bird.

“You...” His heart tripped over its own beat. “Aaron, you didn’t, like, *hurt* him, did you?”

“I killed him.”

The response was so blunt, so unexpected, that Eric jolted back in his seat.

He felt every muscle in his body go rigid.

His teeth buzzed inside his skull.

This wasn’t really happening.

Aaron was joking. He was fucking *joking*.

“And then I turned around, and he was alive again, laughing at me.”

Eric remembered to breathe.

He felt sick—the same sick he’d felt when Mike and Craig had found Eric’s brand-new Firebird unlocked in Banner’s parking lot and decided to move it across the street. The same sick he’d felt when Barney had gotten out of the yard without his collar and tags only to find him sitting on the front step, confused as to why Eric hadn’t left open the front door.

Eric leaned forward, his elbows hit the table, his fingers rubbed his forehead as if trying to absorb what Aaron was saying, giving his nerves a moment to recover from the initial shock, and before he could stop himself, he let out a single, incredulous laugh.

Hazel arrived with Eric’s food. Eric leaned back in his seat.

“Can I get you fellas anything else?” she asked.

They both mutely shook their heads.

She raised an eyebrow and turned away, taking the spare menu she’d left on the table with her. She’d probably phone Eric’s mother later, and

then Eric would have to explain to her why he looked so zoned out that morning.

Aaron killed a kid, but then he said the kid was still alive, and I think it was a joke but I'm not really sure. I think he may be certifiable. I've never met a real-life crazy person before.

He blinked down at his food, but didn't make a move for his fork. Having lost his appetite, he shoved a corner of wheat toast into his mouth for lack of anything better to do. It was a hallucination. Aaron was insane. And yet Eric was the one who felt like he was going crazy. *He* was the one who was supposed to believe in this stuff, and yet here he was, thinking about how it was impossible, how it was completely nuts.

Looking down at his plate of food with mild disgust, he found himself sliding out of the booth to stand by the table.

"I need to take a leak," he said.

He needed to get away from that entire conversation, because it was freaking him out, worming its way into his skull, into the soft tissue of his brain. Not waiting for Aaron to respond, he simply walked away, weaved around tables toward the restroom, the acid of the orange juice making his stomach burn.

Shoving open the bathroom door, Eric stepped up to a urinal, unzipped his fly, and thought back to the first time he'd ever heard someone claim that they had seen ghosts out at Aaron's place. It hadn't been long after Aaron had vanished. The kids who had been dragged to Edith Holbrook's funeral alongside their parents were the ones to start the stories. They had been the ones who'd watched Edie's casket lowered into the ground; they had been the ones who'd witnessed Aaron's absence firsthand. Both Eric and Cheri were watching *Ren and Stimpy* when Mike had made the announcement—Aaron hadn't been at the service; he had been missing. Cheri burst into a fit of inconsolable tears, running out of Eric's house with such dramatic flair it had reminded him of the girlie, sobby movies his mom watched while his dad was at work.

Less than a month later, ghost stories started getting handed down from kid to kid. Someone's sister had gone out to Holbrook House with her boyfriend and a six-pack of beer and they had seen someone in one of the windows; some guys had gone out to Old Mill to shoot guns at glass bottles and they got spooked by someone in the trees. Eric mutely listened

to the stories for months until one evening, sitting around the dinner table, he flat-out asked his mother if ghosts were real. Gina Banner had sighed, shaken her head, and threatened to ban him from all the horror movies he watched up in his room. Eric never brought up ghosts to his mother again. Gina had no idea NAPS even existed. As far as Eric was concerned, she never would.

Cheri, plagued by Aaron's absence, had heard the stories too, some of which suggested that Aaron was the one haunting the house. It was too attractive a mystery, and Eric had been drawn in. He'd been obsessed with the paranormal for the better part of his high school career; that was when he had started collecting weird gadgets—EMF meters and devices that were supposed to record electronic voice phenomena. He would never admit it—not in a million years, especially not to Aaron—but he had been one of the many to crawl through the house's broken windows, but he'd only done it once.

It had been years after Aaron disappeared, but when Eric had seen Aaron's room, the flood of memories nearly paralyzed him with dread. He had run out of there like he'd literally seen a ghost, and when his friends had followed, that was exactly what he told them: not that he had been overwhelmed by the memory of his best friend, crushed by the weight of the unknown, but that he had seen a goddamn ghost, adding to the legend of the house at the end of Old Mill Road. But that was all it was: a story, made-up fiction that one kid would claim and everyone else would believe. What Aaron was claiming didn't make sense. After spending years in graveyards and abandoned buildings, Eric had yet to capture any concrete, scientific proof that ghosts could actually exist.

Eric zipped up his pants and flushed the urinal, washed his hands, and trudged back into the dining room with determination. Aaron hadn't moved. He was still staring out the plate glass window, one of his hands covering his mouth as if holding back a scream.

Eric stared down at his plate of cold food, abruptly pulled his wallet from his back pocket, and tossed a handful of bills onto the table.

"Do you have any proof?" he asked.

Aaron stared at him for a moment, his face sallow, drained of all energy, and then he nodded faintly in reply.

"Yes."

“Then let’s go,” he said, abandoning his booth seat. “If you’ve got it, I want to see.”

Every few seconds, Aaron’s eyes flitted from the road to the rearview mirror. He was half convinced that Eric would think better of the whole thing and stop tailing him at any second. Aaron wasn’t sure what he’d do if Eric veered off in an alternate direction; he needed to show someone the tape, needed to see Eric’s reaction, sure that as soon as horrified realization—or possibly enthralled fascination—drifted across his friend’s face, Aaron would be free of the ever-pressing weight of possible insanity.

His worry over Eric losing interest was unfounded; Eric never put more than a few car lengths between their bumpers, and by the time the gravel driveway crunched beneath Aaron’s tires, he felt strangely revived—his fear and disbelief numbed by a newfound sense of conviction and self-assurance. He *wasn’t* crazy. These things *were* happening. He had documentation, and more important, he had someone to show it to, someone who would take one look at it and validate all of his fears.

Yes, this house is haunted, Eric would say. I should know, I’ve been ghost hunting all my life. I run my own society. I know this stuff.

Eric was a believer, and that meant he was open to seeing the same things Aaron saw—shifting shadows, figures in the trees. Because that was one thing Evangeline’s infatuation with the paranormal had taught him: the ones who believed were more receptive to the other side.

He pulled up on the parking brake and jingled the keys out of the ignition before stepping into the warmth of the morning. It struck him every time, the odd feeling of trepidation despite the sunny weather. Fear was supposed to be born of nightshade and thunderstorms; it wasn’t supposed to exist beneath the blue of a summer sky. There should have been storm clouds on the horizon, at least *some* hint of forewarning, but all the skyline held were cottony tufts of white. Ryder would have called them bunny tails, and despite Aaron’s tension, their silver linings shot a thread of optimism through his unease.

Things were going to get better.

They were going to work out just as soon as someone else believed him, just as soon as someone else knew...

Eric hovered around the back bumper of Aaron's car, keeping his distance until Aaron acknowledged him with a faint nod. When Aaron turned to face the house, he felt lucky to have Eric there. He would have never set foot back inside otherwise.

Not ever, and certainly not alone.

"Are you okay?" Eric asked, noting his hesitation.

Aaron nodded again and forced his legs to move, walking across the weedy front lawn and up the porch steps. When the front door swung open, he searched the corners for blots of darkness, but the front room looked as innocuous as the powder blue sky. Yellow slashes of sunshine cut through the sheer curtains and shone in long rectangles across the hardwood floor. Edie's crocheted blanket winked at them from the center of the room, its kaleidoscopic colors inviting them inside. But Aaron couldn't bring himself to move, cemented in place until Eric's hand fell on his shoulder in silent reassurance that he would follow Aaron inside.

Aaron left the front door wide open behind them. It felt safer that way, like a kid leaving the light on in the hall, never completely closing the bedroom door; like sleeping on the side of the bed closest to the night-light, not daring to let arms or legs jut out from beneath the sheets. He moved around the couch, his heart sputtering at the sight of the camcorder on the floor. Crouching next to the coffee table, he gingerly plucked the device from the floorboards and slid onto the couch, fumbling with the buttons.

It's broken.

He swallowed against a lump of nerves.

Eric will never know what you know.

Gritting his teeth against his own pessimism, he pressed the power button, started to feel himself slip when nothing happened, started to spiral into a well of panic.

He'll never know.

"What's wrong?"

Eric sidled up to the couch and peered down at the camera in Aaron's hands.

Aaron shoved a finger against the power button again, pushing it down as hard as he could, his lungs squeezing the air out of his chest with each failed attempt.

He'll never know what you know.

"No," he whispered dryly, refusing to accept the fact that the machine in his hands was defying him, that his sanity relied on this very thing, that the last thread of clarity would be cut because he had panicked and dropped the goddamn camcorder on the floor.

"Hey." Eric reached down, carefully pulling the device from Aaron's hands. "Take a breath."

Eric's composure was baffling; the way he casually took a seat on the couch next to him, his expression cool and unshaken. It made Aaron want to scream. This recording was the only proof that he hadn't lost his fucking mind, and Eric was looking at him like he was some overdramatic diva.

"Was this on the floor all night?" Eric asked.

Aaron stared at him, afraid to open his mouth in fear of all the things he wanted to say.

I smashed that kid's face in.

I bashed his brains until they were splattered across the floor.

Eric snapped his fingers to bring Aaron back around. "Earth to Holbrook. Where's the charger?"

"Kitchen," Aaron murmured.

When Eric slid off the couch, Aaron couldn't help but trail him, afraid to be out of arm's reach. Eric stepped across the kitchen, approached the counter, grabbed the black cord plugged into the wall, and stuck the end into the camcorder's electrical port. He gave Aaron a satisfied look, turning the device so that Aaron could see the glow of the tiny screen.

"It's fine. No batteries, that's all."

Aaron opened his mouth to speak, but all that came out was a stupefied laugh. He had been ready to lift the thing over his head and hurl it down between his feet, to smash it to bits with his bare hands while weeping hysterical, lunatic tears.

"What am I looking for?" Eric asked, holding the camera out to him.

Aaron squared his shoulders and composed himself as best he could. He didn't want to see the footage again. He felt as though watching that corner of shadow transform into a child for a second time was too much like inviting the madness to stay.

Meeting Eric at the counter, he advanced the recording to the correct spot, skipped through the monologue he didn't particularly want Eric to hear—that was Doc Jandreau territory—and paused it just as his image rose from the couch. He handed the camera back and offered Eric a look of apology.

No, his expression said. *I won't watch it with you.*

There was a price to pay for watching implausibility defy reason, a price Aaron simply couldn't afford.

He turned away, mutely moved to the table, and slid into his seat. He kept his gaze downturned, studying the grain of the wood before him, wondering if things like tables and walls and houses could be imprinted by the past. If he put his ear to the wood, could he hear his own laughter as he and Fletcher played checkers? Could he hear Edie singing Tom Petty songs while she stood over the stove? Was it possible that, if there wasn't someone present to watch a soul pass from this side to the next, that soul could become trapped by the sorrow of that very spot; wasn't that the theory behind ghosts?

Aaron narrowed his eyes at his hands, trying to play the scene in his mind: Edie home alone, tumbling down the stairs. He squeezed his eyes shut as the camcorder played back the thud that had roused him from the couch—a rolling thud, like something, *someone* falling from the second floor to the first.

His nerves bristled beneath his skin.

She had died alone.

Maybe she was the shadow that looked out the windows onto the world, the house that she had been so proud of now nothing but an eternal prison of the soul.

“Aaron?”

He glanced up.

Eric looked puzzled rather than terrified. He shook his head ever so slightly, not having to say a word.

Aaron already knew.

There was no shadow, no leering boy.

“I don't see anything.”

Aaron looked away, his mouth quirking up into a weary half smile, the last thread of sanity pulling itself taut, threatening to snap and let him

tumble, let him go for good.

“Of course there isn’t,” Aaron said.

His voice was hollow, vacant of the hysteria that was roiling inside his skull, and for a second he wasn’t sure the voice was his at all. The kitchen felt like it was growing smaller by the second, the walls pulling inward, his peripheral vision narrowing to pinholes, invisible hands pressing against the sides of his head, trying to collapse his skull.

Eric placed the camcorder on the table and pulled a chair around so he could sit. He studied the camera for a long while, as if trying to piece together a delicate way of telling Aaron he needed to be committed, that he shouldn’t be left alone.

“I know what I saw,” Aaron said, but he couldn’t meet Eric’s gaze.

If the recording showed nothing...

“What *did* you see?” Eric asked.

The kid had erased himself.

Or maybe he hadn’t ever been there at all.

“The shadow in the corner,” Aaron murmured, “the one beside the window; it changed after I got up.”

“What do you mean?”

“It rippled at first, and then...”

it turned into a boy who looked a lot like my son until it sneered with a mouth full of blood.

He went silent, the insatiable need for someone to help him understand suddenly gone; overwhelmed by a wave of realization that it would be easier, so much easier to go through with what he’d been intending for the better part of a year.

End it once and for all.

He was suddenly more exhausted than he’d been in his entire life.

He wanted to sleep.

Close his eyes forever without dreaming a thing.

Seventeen

If anyone had asked Cheri whether or not she was afraid of Miles Vaughn, she would have said no. It had been less than a day since their blowup—the worst one Cheri could recall—and things were already on their way back to being miserably normal. She had spent the majority of the morning sitting at her desk, staring out the window, listening to the echo of death metal spill in through the swinging door of the garage. The time she took away from her desk was spent outside in the shade of the shop, cigarette after cigarette burning down to the first knuckle of her index and middle finger. She wasn't afraid of Miles, and she supposed that was exactly why she drove north past the restaurants on Main Street and ended up on Old Mill rather than picking up Miles's lunch.

She sat in Aaron's driveway for a long while as she chewed on a red fingernail, wondering how long things would continue this way—sneaking out of the office, driving a dozen miles to see a man she had pretended was dead, putting on a smile and trying not to argue with Miles when all she could think about was Aaron out here by himself.

Stepping out of the car, she sauntered across the grass, the spikes of her high heels sinking into the soft earth with each hip-swaying step. She clamored up the front porch stairs and knocked on the door.

No answer.

Cheri tossed a look over her shoulder at Aaron's Tercel. Unless Eric had swung by to pick him up for lunch, Aaron had to be home. She knocked again, then moved around to one of the front windows, cupping her hands against the glass, trying to see inside through the sheer white curtains. The place looked empty, benign, but something about its stasis sent a chill down her arms. Aaron had scared her, not at all the man she had expected, so much more vulnerable than she'd ever imagined.

"Aaron?"

Cheri spoke through the glass, sure he'd be able to hear her. But still, there was no response. Anyone else would have shrugged their shoulders and left, but she couldn't do it. Deep down she was a fatalist. When her cell phone rang in the middle of the night, her first thought was always that someone had died; when Miles wouldn't get home till late, she pictured him trapped inside a mangled wreck on a backwoods road, hit by

some insane drunk who hadn't bothered to stop. And now, with Aaron not answering the door, she couldn't help but imagine him upstairs somewhere, slashed wrists bleeding onto a hardwood floor; or maybe he was in the basement, slowly swinging from the rafters, his feet less than an inch from the ground.

She did an about-face, moved around the side of the house to the back, her own morbid thoughts setting her teeth on edge. She climbed onto the back porch, prepared to pound on the door or break a window to get inside. Lifting a hand, she curled her fingers into a fist and opened her mouth, ready to yell, but all the fight left her when she saw Aaron standing in the middle of the hallway, as though he'd been hiding there, waiting for her to leave.

Cheri closed her mouth, pressing her lips into a tight line.

She watched him as he considered his options, pasted on a wary smile, and eventually dragged his feet all the way to the kitchen door.

"Hey," he said. "Sorry, I was sleeping."

It was a lie and she knew it.

She eyed him and stepped inside, her gaze immediately stopping on the coffeemaker, the overwhelming scent of burned coffee assaulting her senses. Dropping her purse onto the counter, she stepped across the room and pulled the coffeemaker's plug free of the wall socket. Then she turned to look at Aaron, considering calling him out on his lie, but the way he slouched into one of the kitchen chairs made her stop. For half a second she hardly recognized him. He looked so frail, almost ancient in how his shoulders slumped forward.

Cheri looked down at her feet, pressed her fingers to her mouth, then wordlessly let her hand fall to her hip. She nearly laughed at this whole ridiculous idea; if a girl wanted to have an affair, so be it, but it didn't make sense to pick someone like Aaron, not in his state—yet she couldn't bring herself to turn away.

Standing motionless with her arms coiled across her stomach, she waited for him to look up at her. It was only after he did that she spoke.

"Do you want me to leave?"

It took him a few seconds, but he managed to reply. "No."

Cheri released the breath she was holding in and pushed away from the kitchen counter, pulled a chair out from the table more aggressively

than she had anticipated, and sat down with a frown. Aaron had problems she couldn't even begin to imagine, she understood that, but the fact that he was refusing help was enough to make her grit her teeth.

"Do you want me to leave?" she asked again, wondering if she wanted him to say yes, to give her permission to go without feeling guilty.

"I said no," he said, staring down at his hands.

Her nerves sizzled.

It was the same noncommittal game he had played the last time she had been over: He didn't want her to be there, but he didn't want her to leave either. Stay and be ignored. Go and be resented. That, and she could smell him—that all-too-familiar scent she'd grown up with as a girl. He'd been drinking again.

"Then why won't you look at me?" she asked.

When he failed to lift his eyes to hers, she reached out and caught him by the chin.

"Why won't you look at me, Aaron?"

He twisted away from her grasp, calculating his escape.

"Why won't you tell me what's going on?" Her voice rose, trembling with emotion, on the verge of a full-blown yell. "What were you so scared of out on that beach? Why can't you look me in the eye?"

"Because I'm afraid it won't be you!" Aaron shouted and shoved away from the table, his chair toppling over behind him. "You want me to tell you what's happening? I'm seeing things, that's what's happening."

She winced as he waved his hands in front of his face like a demented street performer. He spun away a second later, leaving her to stare at his back.

Cheri lifted her hands as if in prayer. Her thumbs hooked beneath her chin, her eyes not once leaving the plain gray cotton of his T-shirt. She allowed the silence to draw itself across the kitchen, waited for the tension in his shoulders to visibly ease. It was only after the muscles of his back loosened that she spoke again.

"Sit down."

He sat, and she stared at him for a long while before leaning back in her chair. It seemed like months ago when Aaron had first walked in to Vaughn Mechanical. But it hadn't been months; it had been days. Aaron

had looked better then, better *yesterday* than he did now. The hours between now and the last time she'd seen him had been particularly cruel.

He looked sick.

Haunted.

"You shouldn't be out here by yourself," she finally told him. "At least stay in town until the house is done."

"Stay where?"

"Anywhere. Eric has an extra room," she said softly. "I'm sure he would—"

"—let me impose?" Aaron shook his head. "I can't leave anyway." His gaze drifted across the walls of the kitchen before returning to his hands.

"Why not?"

She didn't like the way he had said that, distant and weirdly dreamy, as though the place had wormed its way into his very core.

"I'm tied to this place."

Cheri frowned at that word.

"What do you mean *tied*? By memory?"

"Or something." He actually laughed, let his shoulders rise and fall in an eerily detached way. "Did you talk to Eric? Did he tell you what I did?"

She was suddenly uncomfortable; the air felt thick.

"What are you talking about?"

Cheri swallowed the saliva that had gathered at the back of her throat. There was something wrong, something beyond what had been wrong before.

"Baseball," Aaron said, smiling down at his hands.

She sat silent in her chair, staring at him, desperate to pick apart exactly what part of him was "off." There was something genuinely creepy about the way he was acting, something that made her think of how nice men sometimes turned into mass murderers, how seemingly normal people snapped and took guns to work or killed entire nuclear families.

She nearly jumped when he rose from his seat, but all he did was pace the room. Her hand pressed over her mouth as the vision of the man who had once been her best friend, her first love, began to crumble before her eyes. She was suddenly afraid. This wasn't Aaron Holbrook—not the one

she knew two decades ago, not the one who had been with her on the bank of Bull Shoals Lake the day before.

Gathering herself up, Cheri grabbed her purse and moved across the room to meet him by the refrigerator.

“Come on,” she said. “You aren’t staying here alone.”

Catching him by his arm, she began to pull him down the hall, desperate to get him out of that house, certain that if she didn’t she might never see *this* Aaron again. He was already half-gone. If she walked away now, he’d disappear completely.

Aaron pulled free of her grasp, but Cheri wasn’t one to give up easily. She’d threaten him with everything she had. If he ever wanted to see her again, he’d bend to her wishes; if she had to use guilt to get him moving, she’d remind him of how helpless she had felt when he had vanished, how much pain she had gone through as a girl, all because of him.

Unlocking the front door, she let it swing open before walking around the couch to where Aaron stood, wondering whether this was what he had looked like twenty-one years before—defiant, yet simultaneously unprepared to fight.

“Let’s go, okay?” she asked, trying to coax him closer to the door. “Let’s go talk to Eric, make arrangements. We’ll get your stuff later.”

He didn’t move.

“Let’s go to the lake,” she suggested, hoping that the memory of their visit would spur him on. “We’ll make some sandwiches and wait for Eric’s shift to be over.”

Aaron was staring down at the floor again, rooted to the ground, as though the house had snapped invisible shackles around his ankles. And his expression...it frightened her. His face flitted between indecision and flat-out mutiny, the corners of his mouth quirking up in a ghostly smile that disappeared a second later. Something was raging inside him, some battle that she couldn’t begin to understand; but she knew it would destroy him if she left him in that house, among those trees, nothing but a ribbon of concrete twisting through that lonely corner of the world.

“Aaron.” She whispered his name into the quiet. “You can’t stay out here by yourself. I won’t allow it.”

She caught him by the wrist for a second time, pulled him toward her, ready to drag him through the front door if only to get that weird, glazed-

over look off of his face. But her dogged persistence was derailed by the sound of work boots stalking up the front porch steps. She twisted around, her gaze darting to the front door.

Miles stood in the open doorway, his arms at his sides, his hands balled into fists.

The air left her lungs.

She tried to speak, but it only resulted in her mouth forming the beginnings of an *M*.

No sound, just her lips pressed together like a stutterer attempting to form a sentence, sound that would never come.

Miles charged into the living room toward them both, grabbed Cheri firmly by the arm and shoved her aside before planting his fist against the side of Aaron's face.

Aaron stumbled and fell back against the couch.

Cheri finally found her voice and screamed, "Miles, don't!"

Miles pulled back for a second time, slamming his knuckles against Aaron's mouth.

Blood stained the bottom curve of Aaron's lips. A string of red spit slashed across his chin.

Miles stepped back, slapping his own chest as he sneered at Aaron's bloodied face.

"Come on," he challenged. "Get up and fight, you little prick."

"Stop it!" Cheri yelled, but it did nothing to deter Miles from grabbing the front of Aaron's T-shirt and hefting him up to his feet. Aaron wobbled, then took a few backward steps as he wiped at his mouth, but his eyes were steady on Miles, as if at any moment he'd spring forward and strike.

Cheri couldn't decide which she wanted more, for Aaron to beat the hell out of her husband, or for Miles to simply turn away and go. The first option seemed unlikely; Miles was twice Aaron's size.

Her eyes darted from her husband to Aaron's wounded mouth. His nose was oozing blood so thick it nearly looked like tar. Her breath stuck in her throat when, rather than seeing a look of fear or even anger plastered across his face, she saw a smile that made her skin bristle with alarm.

Aaron was *grinning*, his teeth full of blood as he slowly circled the sofa, his eyes glinting in a way she hadn't seen before—darkness radiating

from his stare.

“Get out,” she said, turning to look at Miles. He needed to go. Something about him being there was making Aaron change. He was feeding off of Miles’s hostility.

Twisting to face her husband again, she gave Miles a shove toward the door.

“Are you fucking serious, Cher? You actually *want* this pathetic piece of shit?” He smirked. “The little bitch won’t even fight for you. You think he’s going to stick around?”

“Shut up,” she hissed. “Get out before I call the cops.”

“He doesn’t even have a job,” Miles protested, bending to Cheri’s push. “Who’s going to buy your fancy shoes and your premium smokes, huh? Who’s going to pay for that? *He* will? Fat fucking chance. He’s just going to disappear like he did before. Once a ghost, *always* a ghost.”

“Because that’s all you’re good for!” Cheri’s words exploded from her throat. “Shoes and cigarettes!”

Miles blinked, surprised by her abrupt declaration. He gave her a wounded look, and suddenly Cheri wanted to take it back. She covered her mouth as a sob tore from her throat. Backing away from her husband, she stood equidistant between them both. Her gaze jumped from the spots of blood on the floor to Aaron’s bleeding face—a future divorcee, a parent who’d lost a child. Their eyes met, and Cheri saw that disturbing spark again, one that made her question who Aaron Holbrook really was.

Aaron stepped around the couch, a wooden baseball bat casually swinging from his fingers.

Crossing the distance to where Miles stood, he stared Cheri’s husband straight in the eye.

Her heart thudded in her ears.

What is he doing?

She suddenly felt hot, dizzy, her runaway pulse making her nauseous.

He’s not really going to hit Miles with that, is he? He wouldn’t...

Miles held his hands up in front of him.

“Hey,” he said. “There’s no fucking need for that.”

Except Miles had asked for it. He had stormed into Aaron’s home, uninvited, and assaulted a man he hardly knew. Had he really expected Aaron to roll over, to let Miles beat the ever-living shit out of him in his

own home? But she couldn't condone Aaron's response, either. It was a lunatic's reaction. Torn between them both, Cheri held back a cry of protest, afraid of what was to come, her eyes growing wide as Aaron leaned back and spit a mouth full of blood into Miles's face.

Miles stumbled back—he'd been expecting a swing of the bat, not a biological assault. His hands swatted wildly at his face, trying to get Aaron's blood away from his eyes and mouth.

While Miles was preoccupied with his own anxiety, Aaron choked up on the bat, wound up, and brought the thing around his front in a fast, relentless sideways arc.

The bat cracked hard against Miles's ear.

Miles cried out despite himself. He stumbled backward, scrambling onto the porch as Aaron followed him outside, ready to swing into him again.

Cheri screamed, suddenly terrified for her husband. In her head she had already left him, but she'd never hoped for this sort of demise. She didn't want to be a widow, whether she and Miles were together or not.

Spilling out onto the porch, she grabbed Aaron by the shoulders from behind, her fingers digging into his skin through his T-shirt like claws.

"Please, stop it!" she wept. "Just let him go..."

But Aaron either didn't care or didn't hear her. He reeled back again, and for a moment Cheri saw her entire past with Miles flash before her eyes. The two of them meeting in the halls of Ironwood High, their first date at Fred's, the first movie they had gone to see together—*Independence Day*. She saw him smiling at her as they sat in his pickup, the sunset lighting up his face in a way that made him oddly beautiful despite his tough exterior. She remembered him getting down on one knee as autumn leaves spiraled around them both, cold wind cutting through the mountains, hissing past the trees. She had spent those moments thinking of another boy—the one she had lost so long ago; and now that boy was advancing with deadly determination while Miles stumbled backward, cowering from the oncoming blow.

"Aaron, please!" She pulled back on his shirt, slowing his approach, but it did nothing to keep him from swinging the bat.

He pulled back and swung again, but Cheri yanked on his shirt just in time. He missed Miles by an inch. Aaron swung again, Miles dodging it

by pure accident as he stepped off the porch and crashed down the stairs, landing in a freshly replanted hydrangea bush. He scrambled away when Aaron leaped down the steps, dead-set on pummeling Cheri's husband within an inch of his life.

The fabric of Aaron's T-shirt tore out of Cheri's grasp, and as he landed in the weedy yard, she released an anguished cry.

Bleeding from his ear, Miles bolted across the yard toward his pickup, and for reasons Cheri couldn't quite fathom, Aaron didn't follow. He stood motionless instead, watching Miles peel out of the driveway with a dazed look on his face.

Cheri was afraid to speak, afraid to reach out to him, not sure if she was utterly insane in not taking off right after Miles, if not to see whether Miles was okay, then to simply get away from the lunatic wielding the baseball bat. Yet, somehow, after a few seconds of terrifying quiet, she gathered up the courage to speak.

"...Aaron?"

She held her breath as he slowly turned to face her, scared to see that disturbing smile pulled across his mouth. But the smile was gone. Aaron tilted his head up to look at her as she towered above him at the top of the steps. The bat slipped from his fingers and thudded to the soft ground at his feet. And just when she was sure he wouldn't say a word, he finally spoke.

"I don't think I should be here anymore."

Eighteen

Aaron winced against the sting of his split lip as Cheri guided her Thunderbird into town. He could sense it from the way she held her silence: She thought he was nuts and she was scared, scared of *him*, her attention never wavering for long.

She had muttered something about Miles, about how she'd need to check up on him later to make sure he was okay. Aaron wasn't entirely sure what she meant by that—from what he remembered, the last time he had seen Miles, Miles was beating the shit out of *him*. Aaron hadn't even touched him—like it would have mattered if he had, what with Miles being twice Aaron's size. But Aaron didn't ask her to clarify, wasn't sure he really wanted to know. Instead, he closed his eyes and tried to ignore the hot throbbing of his face, tried not to pay attention to the taste of blood that lingered on his tongue.

The sky shone deep crimson tones of sunset, setting the poorly lit façade of one of Ironwood's last remaining motels into deep relief. The sun-bleached sign that hovered twenty feet in the air buzzed weakly, advertising rooms starting at twenty-nine bucks per night. Getting away from the house for a few hours wasn't as bad an idea as Aaron had originally thought. It would give him a chance to sleep without those fucking birds chirping in his ear all night long. Cheri zipped the parking brake into place before giving Aaron an unsure smile. He tried to smile in return, but only ended up cringing when a shot of metallic pain seared his swollen lip. Sliding out of the car, Aaron grabbed the duffel bag he'd halfheartedly packed a half hour before and followed Cheri in the direction of a neon arrow, the word *VACANCY* burning bright red as it pointed toward the front office. Like the motel straight out of Hitchcock's classic; Aaron hoped they'd be playing *Psycho* on AMC.

We all go a little mad a little, we all go a little mad...

Stepping into the front office, a sleepy-looking old guy peered up at them from a *Partridge Family* rerun. He adjusted his thick plastic-rimmed glasses, gave Cheri a curt smile, and let his eyes roll over Aaron's tattoos. The guy was an easy read: he didn't like the looks of his newest guests, at least not the weird guy who had straggled in behind Miles Vaughn's wife. Aaron waited for the clerk to ask Cheri what she thought she was doing,

getting a cheap motel room with a man who wasn't her husband. But the guy said nothing, allowing his wandering eyes to settle back on Cheri before asking:

"Room?"

Either Mr. Partridge didn't know her, or he was being courteous for courtesy's sake; sparing Cheri the embarrassment of having to explain herself, or maybe he was worried Aaron—with his busted lip and his inked-up arms—would cause trouble if he spoke out of turn.

"Yes, please," Cheri said, sidling up to the chest-high counter as she rummaged through her purse.

Aaron dropped his bag on the floor, *The Partridge Family* theme song playing as the opening credits rolled.

Come on, get happy!

"Cher, I got it," he said, sliding his credit card and license across the counter, murmuring, "Just one night" at Mr. Partridge.

"But you said—"

"I know what I said. Forget it, it's fine."

He could afford twenty-nine bucks, and a good night's rest would do him a world of good, even though he felt guilty for abandoning the house. As soon as the sun was up, he was heading down Old Mill and getting back to work.

Mr. Partridge's eyes bounced between them like a spectator at a tennis match, and the more Aaron watched him, the more he was convinced the clerk knew who Cheri was. There was a twinkle of recognition in his eyes, a definite sense of familiarity in the way his mouth went tight. Mr. Partridge held his silence, reached an arthritic hand across the counter, and pressed his palm flush over Aaron's credentials. He stared at the picture on Aaron's ID for a long time, as if actually considering denying him a room. But he eventually began to fill out a paper application, copying the information off of Aaron's license by hand.

Aaron and Cheri stood in awkward silence as David Cassidy sang a song about love. Mr. Partridge eventually slid a credit card slip and pen back to Aaron, waiting for the required signature before exchanging the receipt for a single key attached to a diamond-shaped keychain, the number five embossed against green plastic.

“Checkout’s at ten,” the old guy told them, turning his attention back to the television.

Aaron gave Cheri a look, snatched up his bag, and stepped out of an office so bright it took his eyes a moment to adjust to the darkening night sky.

“He was awfully pleasant,” Cheri mumbled as they moved across the lot toward number five. Aaron slowed his steps to a full stop as she continued ahead, his gaze pausing on Cheri’s Ford. The kid sat in the backseat of her car, staring through the windshield at them both. He lifted a hand and wiggled his fingers at Aaron as if to say, *I haven’t forgotten about you.*

“What?” Cheri looked back at her car.

“Nothing.”

The edges of his heart buzzed with anxiety. He needed sleep. A few hours would do wonders, but a full eight would give him a new lease on life. If that kid could just leave him alone for one night, *one* damn night.

Cheri shoved the key into the door lock and Aaron followed her inside. His hand slid across the wall in search of a light switch, but there wasn’t one. Cheri moved through the dark toward a bedside lamp, struggled with the switch, and eventually succeeded in turning on the light.

Still in the doorway, Aaron marveled at the ugliest wallpaper he’d ever seen—mustard yellow with patchwork flowers in shades of brown and gold; a decorator’s nightmare complete with a full-length mirror bolted to the wall opposite a sagging bed.

“Wow,” Cheri said. “The luxuries twenty-nine bucks can buy, huh?”

He didn’t smile at that, the kid in the back of Cheri’s car still gnawing at the fringes of his thoughts. He glanced over his shoulder back across the lot, but the Thunderbird was empty. Aaron clenched his teeth against what he was sure was true—the damn kid was gone because he was already inside room number five.

“The bathroom is equally charming,” she announced from across the room.

Aaron shut the door behind him, dropped his bag next to the door, and proceeded to where Cheri leaned against the bathroom’s doorframe. Dingy yellow tile covered the walls from floor to ceiling, a Formica countertop

sported mystery stains and a grungy sink with a rust ring around the drain. The tub had flower appliqués stuck to the floor and a scale-covered showerhead looming above.

“So...” Cheri slid her hands into the back pockets of her pants. “I should go now so I can come back sooner rather than later. I need to grab some stuff from home, maybe check on...” Her words tapered off. She stared down at the aged carpet, then glanced up at Aaron and forced a smile. “You’ll be okay, right?”

Aaron didn’t have the slightest clue if he’d be okay or not, but he nodded anyway.

“Sure,” he said. “Just going to bed.”

“Do you want any food or anything, before I go? I could swing by somewhere.”

He shook his head. The thing with Miles had happened hours ago, before he had a chance to eat lunch, but the whole incident had made him lose his appetite, and the constant taste of blood in his mouth wasn’t helping.

“Are you sure?” She looked undecided. “I just, I would rather you stay here, okay? Do you have any money?” Pulling her bag from against her hip and around her front, she rifled through it, coming up with a small coin purse shaped like a strawberry. “Here. I saw a soda machine next to the front office, in case you get thirsty.” She slid the little purse onto the shabby entertainment center next to an old TV. “If you want anything else, will you call me?”

Aaron stared at her, confused by how worried she looked. “Cher...” He gave her a little laugh. “I’m fine. Seriously.”

Her expression eased up, a wary smile inching slow-motion across her lips. “Okay,” she finally said. “I’ll just be a few hours, maybe even less.”

Aaron nodded, stepping around to one of the bedside tables. He grabbed the TV remote and pointed it at the relic of a set. *The Partridge Family* blinked onto the screen—the same marathon the guy at the front was watching.

“Okay,” Cheri repeated, seemingly speaking more to herself than to him. “I’ll be right back,” she said, gave him another strained smile, and ducked out of the room, quietly shutting the door behind her.

As soon as she was gone, Aaron dropped the laid-back act and let his gaze sweep the room. He wanted to believe that the kid could only screw with him back at the house—Aaron had seen him around town, but the boy always kept his distance beyond Old Mill Road. Maybe he'd just stand outside in the parking lot all night. And even if he didn't, what was Aaron going to do about it, never shut his eyes again?

You can't worry about things you can't control, Doc Jandreau had told him. You do that, and you're liable to drive yourself insane.

Deciding to take his doc's advice, Aaron stripped down to his briefs and T-shirt, brushed his teeth, and slid into bed to watch David Cassidy gee-golly-gosh his way from one scene to the next. But fatigue loomed heavy, his eyes burning with the need for sleep. The world went fuzzy around the edges and his head lolled to the right, partially propped up by a couple of lumpy pillows. Mercifully, sleep finally came while the shadow of the bed's square headboard loomed tall on the flowered wall behind him.

Growing inch by inch in the pale blue glow of the TV.

Larry Wallace watched Cheri Vaughn and the Holbrook boy wander past four motel room doors before stopping in front of room number five. He'd nearly turned them away as soon as he saw Edie's nephew step into the cramped confines of his front office, but he hadn't told them to get lost because he had no idea what he would have said if they had asked why. The truth would have worked—he wasn't keen on adultery, and then there were the rumors, the stories, the flat-out legends about the Holbrook fella—but Larry wasn't too sure about speaking the truth to the devil's face. You were liable to burn up that way, the whole motel going up in spontaneous flames.

Grabbing for the phone, Larry snatched up his little book of contacts and thumbed through the ragged pages to where he had scribbled Hazel's cell number. He had known Edie's nephew was back in town as soon as Aaron had arrived, but Larry had convinced himself that Aaron Holbrook wasn't his problem. Heck, he hadn't seen the man with his own two eyes until tonight, and yet somehow there had been no doubt in his mind as to who he was staring at the moment Aaron stepped through the door.

Because you can feel the devil when the devil walks in, he thought.

Larry had never bought into the stories of the Holbrook kid being dead, but he had wholeheartedly believed that there was something genuinely wrong with the house at the end of Old Mill Road. If Edie's boy had made it out of Boone County with his soul intact, good for him, but it certainly wasn't unblemished after returning home.

Dialing Hazel's number, Larry shook his head to himself—you couldn't live with the devil and expect to come out whole.

Eric sat up on his couch, squinted against the darkness of his living room, grabbed the remote, and paused *The Cabin in the Woods* to listen for a follow-up knock on the door. It came a few seconds later and he climbed to his feet, dusting potato chip crumbs from his shirt while Barney the German shepherd lazily looked up from his giant dog pillow. Eric gave the dog an amused sort of look as he moved toward the foyer.

"Some watchdog, Barns," he said beneath his breath. "Keep up the good work."

Rubbing his hands against the sides of his jeans, he was surprised to see Cheri through the peephole. Her arms were crossed protectively across her chest; her head was tipped down, the soft waves of her hair obscuring half her face. Eric shot a glance at the digital clock sitting on a table close to the door—the only thing that kept him from being late to work on a daily basis. It was after eleven. He raised an eyebrow, unlocked the door, pulled it open, and greeted the woman he'd known his entire life with a suspicious glance.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

Cheri stared at him with a don't-be-a-smartass look.

"If you're selling cookies, I'll take three boxes of the mint kind."

"Are you going to let me in?" she asked. "Or are you going to make me stand outside while you make stupid jokes all night?"

"Whoa, hey...*maybe*, if you're going to be an ass about it."

Eric stepped aside with a frown. Cheri was in one of her moods again—probably another fight with meathead Miles. Eric swore she secretly hated her husband, but the one time Eric dared question her feelings, she had flown off the handle and refused to speak to him for weeks.

Cheri ducked inside.

“Have you seen Aaron today?” she asked, turning to face him just inside the foyer.

Her expression made him nervous. It was stern, no-bullshit. Tonight, Cheri was all business. Barney sauntered over to greet Cheri with a lackadaisical wag of his tail. She scratched behind his ear, but her eyes were fixed on Eric.

“Yeah, I saw him first thing this morning,” Eric told her.

He motioned to the living room, suggesting they not stand around the door all night. She crossed her arms again and marched ahead of him, sinking onto his couch a second later.

“You want a beer?” he asked.

“I’m not here to hang out,” Cheri said.

Eric cleared his throat and sat down in the high-backed chair next to the couch—a piece of furniture he picked up for nothing but looks. The red cushion was stiff and uncomfortable, and the angle of the back was too upright. He never sat in it, but he liked the sophistication it gave the room. He struggled to get comfortable in it, shifting his weight from one side to the other, crossing his arms over his waist, then stretching them out along the armrests.

Cheri frowned as Barney nuzzled his nose beneath her hands. She absentmindedly rubbed his ears and exhaled a breath.

“We need to talk,” she finally said.

“Talk about what?”

She made eyes at him as though he was the stupidest person on the planet: *Get with it, Eric.*

“What,” he asked, “about Aaron?”

“Yes, about Aaron. Where did you see him? What happened?”

Eric grimaced at the inquisition. He wasn’t sure he wanted to talk about the conversation they’d had early that morning, not sure he was ready to tell Cheri about how freaked out Aaron had been, or how he had nearly refused to step back inside the house—at least not before knowing exactly what Cheri was getting at.

Aaron had acted crazy, but he had sought Eric out, he had chosen to speak to *him* about his experiences. Their entire exchange felt like one of those secrets you were supposed to keep for better or worse, not spill the second a mutual friend demanded to know.

“He came to the store, asked if I wanted to grab breakfast.”

Eric shrugged as though it had been the most mundane meeting he’d ever had.

“Yeah?” Cheri asked, her tone edgy. “That’s it? You guys just had some pancakes and talked about the weather?”

“Pretty much,” he murmured, recoiling when Cheri’s fist slammed into his shoulder with surprising roughness. She glared at him, Barney stupidly panting between them both rather than defending his master.

Eric winced, rubbing his arm. “What the hell was that for?”

“For not being straight with me,” she said. “There’s something seriously wrong with him, Eric. He isn’t acting like himself.”

“What does that even mean?” Eric asked her. “*Acting like himself*. How do we even know what *himself* is?”

Cheri looked almost offended at Eric’s suggestion. He supposed he should have seen it coming. Cheri had never gotten over Aaron disappearing; Eric could only imagine how out of control her fixation had become over the past handful of days.

“What? You’re going to tell me you know him despite him being missing for so long? Come on, Cher.”

“What did he tell you?” Cheri asked, ignoring his last comment. “Do you have any idea how screwed up he is? Do you even know why he’s here; that he had a son?”

Eric blinked, shaking his head, the sudden onset of confusion making him even more uncomfortable than he already was. He regretted sitting in that chair. He wanted to move to the couch, but he didn’t want to sit that close to her, didn’t want to get punched again.

“No,” he said, a little unsure. “He didn’t mention anything about a kid, not his anyway; just about some kid who was giving him hell from day one. I mentioned it to you earlier—his issues with trespassers, remember?”

“Well, this has nothing to do with trespassing. He can’t stay there anymore. Not by himself. Whatever it is about that house—bad memories or something—it’s driving him insane.”

“So what do you—”

“You have room, right?” She cut him off. “You need to take him in.”

A surge of insubordination washed over him. It was one thing for Cheri to come into his house demanding information, but it was altogether another to insist he open up his house, his *life*, to a guy they arguably hardly knew anymore.

“Wait a minute, wait a minute,” he said, but Cheri was vehemently shaking her head.

She rose from the couch, her arms held straight at her sides, her face twisted with pleading insistence. Eric peered at her as she stood there, near tears, her breaths suddenly heaving.

“I left Miles.” She spit the words as though they were foul. “He showed up at Aaron’s house; he attacked him...”

Eric stared at her. “Wait, what?” He straightened in his seat. “Who attacked *who*?”

Cheri swiped a hand across her face.

“Miles attacked Aaron at first,” she said, sounding a little unsure. “But then...”

She hesitated, shook her head as if to say she didn’t understand what had happened herself.

“Why would Miles attack Aaron in the first place?”

Eric’s eyes widened. He’d always been a little slow on the uptake, but things were becoming clearer.

“Oh, shit.”

“Yeah.” Cheri exhaled an abrasive laugh. “Oh, shit.”

He couldn’t take it anymore. Shoving himself out of that chair, he moved across the room, pacing in front of the television before turning to look at her.

“So, Aaron retaliated?”

Cheri nodded slowly.

Eric couldn’t picture it—scrawny Aaron Holbrook laying into beefcake Miles Vaughn. But then he remembered the confession Aaron had made at the Ox, the one that had nearly made him choke on his wheat toast.

I killed him.

Eric’s chest went tight with the memory.

He chewed the inside of his cheek, not sure whether he really wanted an answer to the question he was about to ask.

“How?”

Cheri looked up at him without response.

“How did he retaliate?” Eric clarified.

She swallowed, fear eking into her eyes.

“With a baseball bat,” she whispered.

“Holy shit.” The words jumped out of him reflexively, knee-jerk, involuntarily.

“I was afraid he was going to kill him,” Cheri confessed, her words so quiet that, if his senses hadn’t been heightened by his own alarm, he very likely wouldn’t have heard them. But he *did* hear them. Despite their softness, those words sounded like a scream.

“This is insane,” Eric murmured.

He didn’t get it, wasn’t sure he wanted to understand. One minute, Aaron was telling him about a kid he had bludgeoned to death with a baseball bat—the next, Cheri was recalling how Aaron had nearly killed Miles in the exact same way. Eric’s nerves hissed beneath his skin. This wasn’t a coincidence. Aaron had been telling the truth. There was something wrong with that house; there was someone *in* that house.

“Christ, okay,” he said. “Okay, okay...” He shot a look around the living room despite not knowing what he was looking for. “Okay, yeah, he can stay here. Let’s just get him out of there.”

“I already did,” she said. “He’s at the motel on Main. I couldn’t leave him, not after he lost it like that.”

Lost it.

Eric imagined Aaron swinging a bat over his head like a lunatic; he pictured the look of surprise Miles must have worn.

“What are *you* going to do?” he asked, giving Cheri a stern look. “This changes everything, right? I mean...you can’t stay at your place anymore, not after what happened.”

Cheri gave him a pained yet hopeful smile.

“Ah,” he said, then sighed in surrender. “Sure, why not?”

Cheri threw her arms around him in thanks and pressed a kiss to his cheek, but Eric couldn’t help but scowl over her shoulder. Half an hour ago he had been watching movies with Barney; now he had two new roommates for an unknown amount of time.

“It won’t be for long,” Cheri told him, reading his perturbed expression. “Just a few days until I can figure things out.”

“Okay,” Eric said. “It’s fine, I just...I didn’t expect it.”

“I know, and I love you.” She gave him another squeeze before backing away. “But I have to go. I have to deal with...” She waved a hand in front of her. “This. Miles. Aaron really clocked him.”

“You want me to go with you, just in case?”

He didn’t much feel like seeing Miles in a highly agitated state, but he had always been plagued by a morbid sense of curiosity. The idea of Aaron swinging a baseball bat at Miles Vaughn freaked him out, but it didn’t stop him from wanting to see the damage. That, and there was no telling what Miles would do if he was irate, if he caught Cheri alone.

“No, it’ll make it worse,” she insisted. “He probably isn’t at the house anyway. But will you go to the motel? I just...the idea of Aaron being alone right now, I don’t know...”

Eric nodded, understanding her concern.

“He’s in room five. Here.” She shoved a ten-dollar bill into his hand, already moving toward the front door. “Get him some food, okay? He hasn’t eaten. Just sit with him.”

Eric frowned at the crumpled money against the palm of his hand. He’d never seen Cheri this frazzled before. She seemed genuinely scared, as though whatever she had seen transpire between Aaron and Miles had changed the way she looked at the world.

He was only glad Cheri didn’t believe Holbrook House was haunted. If she had shared Eric’s suspicions of what was happening to Aaron, she wouldn’t have ever left him alone.

Nineteen

The TV show's dialogue ebbed in and out of Aaron's consciousness, loud and faint, louder and nearly nonexistent, eventually fading completely as

a woman stepped into the mouth of the hallway, the hem of her dress brushing against her calves. She was nothing but shadow, the brightness of the sun at her back throwing her into silhouette. Aaron recognized the room behind her—the kitchen, the big window above the sink framing the greenery of the backyard; trees thick with leaves, a perfectly preened lawn stretching as far as the tree line.

The woman jerked her head up at the sound of a thud from the second floor. Someone was crying between wet, muffled knocks.

She drifted down the hall, her bare feet soundlessly padding across the hardwood floor. The sun that bit into the shadows of the hallway illuminated her as she advanced: first her feet, then the edge of her white dress; a dress that strikingly resembled the kind a bride would wear to an outdoor, summer affair—light, airy, silk organza dancing upon the lightest breeze.

The woman stopped at the foot of the stairs, her gaze trailing up the risers until it paused on a pair of feet. A boy stood at the top of the staircase, his eyes fixed on hers, his face and arms dusted in what looked like a smattering of paint. A baseball bat swung gently from his fingers, the varnished wood dripping onto the floor beside his right foot.

The woman in white opened her mouth, speaking soundless words at the boy above her, her face twisted in an expression that was trying for confusion but skirted understanding too closely to be convincing. The corners of the boy's mouth quirked up into a smile, as if responding to what the woman had said, but the woman didn't smile in return. Instead, she began to climb the steps, a look of horror pulling her eyebrows into high arches above her eyes.

Reaching the top of the stairs, she pressed a hand to her chest, both her mouth and eyes forming a trifecta of near-perfect Os.

What had once been a boy lay on the floorboards, nothing but arms and legs akimbo with a smear of red where his head should have been.

She took a staggering sideways step, shaking her head, ready to scream only to be startled into silence.

The boy sprang out of an open doorway and swung, catching the side of her face with the tip of the bat.

The woman exhaled a silent cry as she fell backward, her ear blooming like a red flower tucked into her hair. She soared in slow motion, landing on her back in the center of the staircase, tumbling down the rest of the way until she was spread out, facedown at the foot of the steps.

The boy jumped down the stairs, the edge of the baseball bat dragging across the wall as he descended in silent, bounding leaps. He tilted his head to the side as he inspected the damage, nonchalantly nudging the woman in white with the tip of his sneakered foot. The woman's face tightened with pain, and the boy grinned above her as she cried out again.

Dropping the baseball bat to the floor, the boy skipped down the hall and into the kitchen, accompanied a moment later by the sharp glint of a butcher's knife. He straddled her, a satisfied smirk coiling across his lips, lifted the knife, and jerked

awake. For a split second the sheets pooled around Aaron's waist weren't white, but wet and sopping red. The kid stood at the foot of the bed, his silhouette outlined in the pale blue of the TV, his hair twisted up into crude horns.

A scream hitched in Aaron's throat, a desperate cry for him to be left alone.

But just as his yell was about to surface, the room appeared the way he remembered it—arguably clean sheets, the flicker of seventies Americana on the TV.

Aaron's mouth went dry.

His gaze shot to the bathroom door.

He'd brought his pills.

Three or four, just to put him under, to grant him a few hours of rest.

His bare feet hit the carpet. He shoved open the bathroom door, flipped on the light, and cringed against the brightness. Ugly yellow tiles winked at him as he stood in front of the sink. He struggled with the cap, his palms sweaty, his hands trembling. He gave it a firm twist, and the bottle cap popped out of his hand, bounced across the counter, and dropped to the floor.

Aaron pressed a hand over his eyes to momentarily shield himself from that bathroom's glare, leaving the open prescription bottle beside the sink to search the floor for the white plastic lid. Kneeling down to peer beneath the lip of the counter, he found it there, nestled into a corner between the counter and wall. Catching its edge between a pair of fingers, he rocked back onto his feet with a groan, turned on the tap, and shook three yellow tabs into the palm of his hand.

He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror as the tap hissed cold water into the dingy basin of the sink. But the man who stared back at him was no longer a man Aaron knew. His face was sallow and gaunt, the dark circles beneath his eyes giving them a sunken, holocaustic appearance. His hair needed cutting, a three-day-old beard made him look like a man he could only guess was an image of the father he'd never met.

The tattoos were the only things that were familiar: a murder of crows spiraling up his ribs and toward his heart like a cyclone, the dead branches of a tree coiling up his arm—home to a single owl hidden against his side. The eagle's wings that circled his neck looked like hands beneath the glare of an old light bulb, choking him with the lightest touch—so light it had taken thirty-four years to squeeze the life from his lungs.

A soft whisper sounded from behind the shower curtain, like someone fluttering their fingers against the draped plastic that hung from the rod.

Aaron spun around, his back pressed to the bathroom counter as he stared at the clouded plastic sheet.

It swayed ever so slightly, as if having been pushed by the faintest breeze.

Small citron-colored pills clinked against porcelain as the prescription bottle tipped into the sink, pushed over by a misplaced palm. There was someone behind that curtain; he was certain of it.

Aaron pushed himself away from the counter—the tap still hissing behind him.

He slowly lifted his right arm.

Fingers grazing across the filmy sheet that hung from cheap plastic rings.

Squeezing his eyes shut, his hand closed around the curtain.

He sucked in a shallow breath.

Shoved the valance away.

He staggered backward, the drape popping off a few of its rings.

The floral appliqués were gone, submerged beneath a bathtub brimming with blood—so full that it lapped at the lip of the tub, dozens of dead crows bobbing up and down in the gore. By the time Aaron's back hit the counter, thick claret poured onto the floor, rolling down the sides, coating the tile in viscous red.

Live starlings clawed their way out of the rusted faucet, far too big to fit and yet defying logic as they spread their wings and frantically flew around the room, slamming their bodies into the walls, the small window above the toilet, the mirror, the cabinets.

A strained yell bounded out of Aaron's chest.

He turned to run but his feet slipped on the gore.

Clutching the counter in an attempt to stay on his feet, his legs shot out from beneath him and he hit the ground. His briefs and T-shirt soaked up blood as he ice-skated around the bathroom on his hands and knees, desperately trying to get to the door. But the more panicked he became, the more impossible escape seemed to be. It was as though the world had tilted on its axis just enough to make the floor pitch toward the back wall, that invisible incline keeping Aaron where he was—scrambling to move but somehow frozen in place.

He shot a wild-eyed look at the tub, that deep red seemingly endless, coming from nowhere, the birds still crawling out of the faucet like roaches, only to take flight and break their own necks.

But his gaze froze on what hadn't been there before—the top of a head, a girl floating in that bloodied tub, her eyes open, her mouth agape. Despite his fear, Aaron found himself staring at this new face, one that brought with it a distinct sense of *déjà vu*, as though he knew this particular victim from some distant life, as though he'd seen her in old photographs in Aunt Edie's family album.

He swallowed the saliva that had collected in his mouth, thick and cloying as it slithered down his throat. Carefully pulling himself to his feet, he gripped the edge of the counter with blood-sticky fingers, gave himself a better vantage point from which to look down on to the dead girl in the tub.

With his breath held fast in his chest, Aaron took a single forward step toward the tub.

And as if awakened by that small movement, the girl turned her head to face him with a snap, her mouth pulling up in a joker's grin.

Aaron screamed.

He flung himself at the door.

His shoulder caught on the jamb so violently that his entire right arm went numb.

Somehow, by some unseen mercy, he managed to stumble back into the room, trekking blood onto dingy brown carpet, his ears throbbing beneath the sound of his pulse.

He veered around, gaping at a bathroom that was no longer yellow but unnervingly red, hot and glistening like the insides of a fresh kill. Reaching for the bathroom door with gore-slicked fingers, he slammed it shut, then bolted across the room, ready to sprint into the Arkansas night.

But he caught something from the corner of his eyes.

The kid crouched in the far corner of the room, naked and crimson-smeared, a giant crow held in both his hands. He dipped his head down, tore at the bird with his teeth, meat shredding, tendons stretching, the kid's eyes fixed on Aaron as he leered with a mouth full of flesh and blood.

Aaron exhaled a strangled cry.

The last thread of sanity snap snap snapped from its moors.

He struggled with the door, fumbling with the lock that Cheri had twisted into place before slipping out into the night.

It swung open, and Aaron bolted into the darkness—barefooted, in nothing but his boxer shorts and undershirt, tearing across the parking lot like a track and field star as two words pounded against the inside of his skull.

Go home.

Twenty

The late-night drive home from the diner was the most soothing part of Hazel's day, especially after a double shift of slinging coffee and clearing plates.

Larry had left a message on her voice mail—strange for Larry, because he didn't often call, not unless he wanted her to stop by the motel with a cinnamon bun or a slice of cherry pie. Hazel and Larry hadn't ever been much for talking, even as kids. The sibling duo were more likely to sit around the TV set watching *Howdy Doody* than chat about which teachers they mutually disliked or which kid got shoved around on the playground during lunch. But it was far too late for cinnamon buns or pie, and besides, Larry hadn't said much on the phone—*Heya, Hazel, just saw something I thought you'd be interested in hearin' about. Gimme a call.* If it had been an emergency, he would have been specific; if he had really wanted her to call in the dead of night, he would have made a point of telling her how long he was working the front office that night. At half past eleven, Hazel was sure her brother had been relieved of his post, sure that he was sleeping safe and sound next to Marcy, who'd chew Hazel's ear off if she dared call so late.

Hazel would return Larry's call first thing in the morning, but for now all she wanted was to get home, kick off her shoes, and settle onto the couch with a pint of Ben & Jerry's ice cream and *Boardwalk Empire* on DVD. Harold hated the show, said that Steve Buscemi's face reminded him of a worn-out shoe—she was pretty sure Harold was just jealous; Hazel had a little crush on him, and she was pretty sure Harold knew. But Harold wouldn't be home for another two nights driving back from New York State, and Hazel was free to binge on Prohibition-era gangsters to her heart's content.

At least it's better than Sons of Anarchy, she thought to herself. You can keep up with Buscemi, but there's no way of keeping up with those young biker boys. Not anymore, Harry, not at your age, my dear.

Cruising down Main Street at a good ten below the speed limit—she'd always been a slow driver, preferring to enjoy the scenery rather than worry about talking her way out of a ticket—she eased her little Peugeot hatchback around the roundabout and gave the giant lumberjack a salute

as she cleared the intersection. It was a move both she and her two brothers had adopted via their corporal father, God rest his soul.

But despite Hazel's eagerness to get home and marathon a couple of episodes of her favorite show, she couldn't help but lean forward and narrow her eyes at the peculiar figure walking along the side of the unlit road. A man walked toward the same intersection she was driving to, one that would fork and give her the option of either going home or driving up Old Mill to Edie's old place.

Ironwood didn't have many hitchhikers. It was nearly three miles from the highway, and most of the folks who wanted to grab a bite to eat or stop in for gas took care of their business at the truck stop just off the exit. It was rare to get travelers at the Blue Ox, let alone wandering the streets after everything was closed. But that wasn't what caught Hazel's attention. The wanderer looked as though he was half-dressed, walking the shoulder in what she could only assume were his pajamas.

"What in the world?"

She slowed the Peugeot to a creep despite every nerve in her body insisting she floor it and rocket past this potentially homicidal maniac. If this was a hitchhiker, picking him up certainly wouldn't be wise. Hazel watched shows like that, too. She'd seen every episode of *Dexter*; she knew how psychos worked. But Crazy Hazey had always been the curious one of her family. She couldn't resist slowing enough to get a look at the wanderer anyway, blinking at the copious amounts of ink that decorated the man's arms and legs.

She recognized Edie's boy long before he turned his head to look at her. Ten miles from home, it would take him hours to get back on foot, if that was what he was doing in the first place.

Keep driving, Hazey, Harold told her. Go watch your stories. Don't go stickin' your nose where it doesn't belong.

Except that Hazel felt like it *was* her business. Ironwood was her home, and while Edie's old place out at the end of that road hadn't bothered nobody for over twenty years, it was liable to bother somebody now.

Aaron slowed his steps as Hazel's hatchback came to a crawl. He eventually stopped completely and stepped up to the car, and for a second her blood ran cold.

What the hell are you doing, she screamed at herself. What if what you believe about that house is true? Last thing you want is Aaron Holbrook inside your car.

And yet, there she was, leaning across the center console to roll the window down.

“You need a ride, sugar?” she asked, because this was Edie’s nephew; this was one of her closest friend’s little boy. How would she ever explain herself to Edie on the other side? Standing beside the pearly gates, what would she do—lift her shoulders in a helpless shrug and say, *Sorry, Dee, I was running scared?*

And what was there to be scared of anyway? Edie had broken her neck. The police hadn’t suspected any foul play, and even if there had been something sinister going on, Aaron had been fourteen and at school. It was ridiculous, *ridiculous* to think that Edie’s sweet little boy had anything to do with it.

Except you don’t think he had anything to do with it, she reminded herself. It isn’t the boy; it’s the house. It’s always been the house, and it’ll always be the house.

“Nonsense,” she whispered to herself, Aaron standing mutely just beyond the passenger window. “Come on,” she said, nodding to the man on the street. “I know where you’re headed. I’ll take you home.”

When Aaron grabbed for the handle to pull the passenger door open, Hazel’s heart clambered up her throat. Suddenly she was terrified, because maybe her daddy had been right; maybe the house at the end of Old Mill belonged to the devil and anyone who dared go inside slowly lost pieces of their soul. Maybe Edie’s nephew *was* a nut and this was the last night of her life; he would drag her into the woods and rape her, pummel her face in with a rock until there was nothing left but unrecognizable, bloody pulp. Harold would come back home but Hazel wouldn’t be there. He’d call the Ox, but they’d tell him she hadn’t come in for days.

Harold didn’t even know how to run the dishwasher without flooding the kitchen with soapsuds; how in the world would he live without her? The kids would be burdened by her disappearance, all because Hazel was overwhelmed by the need to help out a long-dead friend.

Ridiculous, she reminded herself. Aaron hadn’t been the one responsible for Edie’s death. If anything, he was the one who had suffered

the most.

But her daddy's stories...

That kid, Isaac, he ate birds. I saw it with my own two eyes. Crouched in the corner of the school yard, he turned to look at us boys and he had a crow grasped in his hands like one of them giant turkey legs you get at the fair, his mouth nothing but blood, and when we started yelling all he did was smile, like it was the funniest thing he'd ever seen.

The possibility...

Two boys had gone over to the house out on Old Mill on a dare. Nobody wanted anything to do with that Isaac kid, but nobody wanted to be called chicken either. I was supposed to go, but someone was looking out for me that day...

That had been in the thirties. She remembered the date because Daddy said it was during the Dust Bowl. When Bonnie and Clyde were killed by the police, Daddy had skipped class to buy a paper about the death of his two favorite folk heroes instead of going to school—it was the day the bird eater had been asked not to return, exiled to a life of being taught by his adoptive parents rather than sitting in class with the rest of the Ironwood kids.

Hazel shuddered and gave Aaron an unsure smile.

He looked bad, almost unlike the man she'd seen at the diner earlier that morning. His cheeks were sunken, making his face look skeletally gaunt. His bottom lip was split and his nose swollen, as though he'd gotten into a row with someone—maybe with Eric Banner; they had left the Ox together, after all. Though Hazel knew Eric better than that. He wasn't that kind of boy.

And then there was the fact that Aaron wasn't responding to Hazel's offer of a ride. He simply stared at her like a lost animal, and while it made her want to reach out to him, it gave her just as much pause. His gaze looked distant, like he was a million miles away.

"Aaron?" She dared call him by his first name, wondering if it would snap him out of his daze.

Hearing it, Aaron blinked, then leaned down to the window as if only realizing then that Hazel was waiting for him to climb aboard.

"Can you drive me home?" he asked.

His question gave her the creeps. He hadn't heard a word she had said, but she certainly couldn't leave him there now. She'd feel terrible about it, and feeling terrible would ruin her entire night.

"Sure."

Her response was reflexive—a nervous tic—but she hesitated when he pulled on the handle of the locked door. Was he *really* okay? Did she genuinely think she knew him that well? Sure, he was Edie's kid, but some nice people were baddies in disguise.

When the boys didn't come home, the police drove out to the house at the end of Old Mill and found them and Isaac's ma. He'd killed them all—pushed one out the window, beat the other one to death with a baseball bat, stabbed his momma until his arms got tired, and then he just up and disappeared. Just like that...a phantom. A ghost.

Hazel nearly jumped at the sound of the passenger door opening.

Aaron slid into the seat next to hers and slammed the door shut. He stared ahead, studying the woods that were illuminated by the headlights, studying them as though he belonged there rather than where he was.

Hazel gulped as he slowly turned his head to look at her.

He was obsessed with birds.

Her gaze drifted across his arms, inching up the jagged branches that decorated his skin.

He just up and disappeared, as though he'd run off into the branches that slithered up his left arm, branches that belonged in the woods.

Hazel's heart leaped into her throat.

She choked on her own pulse.

Jerking her gaze away from her passenger, she stared though the windshield, gripped the steering wheel so hard her knuckles went white.

"Can you drive me home?" Aaron asked, repeating his question.

"Yes," she whispered, nearly croaking out the one-word answer.

Pressing her foot against the gas, she stared ahead at the road, a million questions rolling through her head. What if her daddy had been right—not just right about the house, but about Isaac's father as well? What if the bird eater's dad had been a locked-up lunatic who hadn't lived long enough to see Isaac born, frying in the electric chair for murders he'd

committed throughout Arkansas, murders he had marked with a pair of bloody handprints?

They called his pops Birdie, her father had said, because of the prints he'd leave at the scenes of his crimes. They hauled him off to Cummins State Farm and fried 'im before Isaac was born, but the devil got in 'im anyways. Maybe his daddy wasn't ready t'go.

She calls him Birdie, Edie had whispered of Miranda with a shake of the head. We don't know what's wrong with her. I'm worried that Pa will finally get fed up and send her away.

But that's impossible, she remembered thinking, because everyone in town knew Edie's sister hung around empty buildings with whatever boy would have her. Everyone knew that Miranda was easy. Nobody, except maybe Edie's daddy, had been surprised to find out that she was pregnant at fourteen years old.

She screams that Birdie did it, Edie insisted. She screams that she's having the devil's son.

A cry inched up Hazel's throat. She jammed her foot against the gas, pushing the Peugeot to the outer limits of its top speed. The trees flew by them in a blur. The headlights seemed to dim as they sailed down Old Mill Road, unable to keep up with Hazel's sudden urgency to reach the house at the end of that dead-end street.

And what if, once they arrived at the house, Aaron insisted she come inside? What if he dragged her in by her hair, pinned her down in the very spot Edie had died, and stabbed her over and over, over and over, over and...

She swallowed down a sob.

No, that wouldn't happen. Edie hadn't been stabbed.

So he'll break your neck, she thought. What's the difference? You're driving to the devil's den.

"I knew your aunt." Hazel's words came out strangled, but she felt that if she didn't say something, she'd end up screaming all the way down the road.

Aaron stared at her, the curves of his face illuminated by the glow of the dashboard.

His mouth quirked up at the corners, as though hearing Hazel mention Edie had spurred a pleasant memory, but his eyes were vacant.

Looking away from him, she gripped the wheel hard enough to make her joints ache.

“Edie and I were best friends when we were little.”

You can't go to that house, Hazel. I know you and Edie are close, but you can't go to that house, you understand?

She hadn't thought of her father's warnings in so long, but they were all coming back to her now—the stories of how he had stood on Old Mill the day the police found the two boys and Isaac's mom; the fact that it was Boone County's one and only manhunt, the local police banding forces with state and county troopers, scouring the woods behind what would eventually become Edie's home; the way the kids weren't allowed to play outside for weeks while the cops searched for Isaac Ryder.

Realization snapped Hazel back into the present.

Isaac Aaron Ryder.

Miranda hadn't known the invisible boy's name—it was why she had given him a nickname instead. And yet somehow her son ended up named after the boy who didn't exist.

“Did you know my mother?”

Hazel nearly jumped when Aaron spoke. She dared look at him, and for the briefest moment her fear wavered. Aaron looked hopeful as he awaited her answer, his once empty eyes brimming with longing to know the girl who had killed herself in the tub—a fact Hazel was sure Edie had kept from her sister's son.

“I did,” Hazel said, her throat still dry, her muscles refusing to relax; but if talking about his mother would get her through this trip in one piece, she'd gladly tell Aaron tales about Miranda Bell. “She was a little younger than me, but she was a wonderful girl.”

Aaron turned his head away, staring out his window at the trees that flew by outside. Hazel momentarily squeezed her eyes shut despite their speed, wishing that diamond-shaped dead-end sign into existence.

Larry would kill her if he ever found out about this.

Her father was surely rattling his coffin lid with pounding fists.

“She was a whore.”

Hazel blinked at the words that quietly slithered past Aaron's lips.

Her stomach dropped to her feet when he started to laugh—quiet, under his breath, but it was an undeniable chuckle, as though he'd just

remembered a joke.

When the Peugeot's high beams slashed across the metal sign a thousand feet ahead, a sliver of optimism speared Hazel's heart. If he hadn't killed her yet, maybe she still had a chance. She wouldn't pull up the driveway—no, that would be too close to the devil's house; that would be tempting fate. She'd let him out on the street, pull a U-turn and rush back home.

Or maybe she *would* go to Larry's, lie and say the power went out or the pipes ran dry or that there was some mangy stray hanging around the driveway when she got back from work; anything but the truth would work.

Hazel slowed the hatchback to a roll as Edie's gravel driveway came up on their left. When the car came to a complete stop without turning in, Aaron offered Hazel a curious glance, and she got a final glimpse of the man beneath the madness. His face was kind, and his eyes reminded her of the good times she'd had with Edie nearly forty years ago. Her panic momentarily waned again, and for the briefest of moments she had the urge to reach out to him, to tell him that everything would be all right as long as he didn't go back in that house; if he'd just let her drive him away from here things would get better. Except that she knew it wasn't possible; she knew it wasn't true.

Aaron was Miranda's son, and if Miri had been telling the truth, Aaron's father was...

"Thank you," Aaron told her, popping open the passenger-side door.

Dazed, Hazel watched him climb out of her car without incident and step across the front of the car, the high-beams slashing across his boxer shorts and white undershirt in two bright, flashing bursts. He began to climb the slight incline of the drive and she thought, *My God, Hazel, he's just a man, a regular man you've turned into a monster inside your head.*

Her father would have called her fear justified, but her mother would have clucked her tongue and shaken her head in disapproval. Hazel hadn't been raised to assume the worst about people, and there she was, assuming the worst about her best friend's boy.

Regardless, she wasn't about to stick around.

Guiding the car through a four-point turn, she finally got the hatchback pointed toward Ironwood proper and brought it to a slow creep past the

driveway. That was when she noticed Aaron veering off to the trees rather than heading to the house. He leaned down, and when he straightened again, a giant crow hung upside down from his grasp.

Hazel rammed her foot against the gas pedal, and the ratty old hatchback went sailing down the road.

Less than a mile from Holbrook House, Hazel screamed and jerked the wheel to the right.

The tires screeched against the pavement as the Peugeot spun around like a top, the driver-side door crunching into the trunk of a tree.

Hazel's head smacked against the window during impact, but for a moment she was able to stay conscious.

That moment was spent listening to the tired blare of the car horn as it blasted into the night; it was spent staring at the boy who had perched like a gargoyle on the top of her crumpled hood—perched and grinned as he tore the head off a starling with his teeth.

Twenty-one

Eric hesitated yards before ever reaching the door to room number five. It was cracked open, allowing the flickering glow of a television to spill out onto the lot.

“Aaron?”

Eric nudged the door open with the tip of his sneaker, peeking around the wood of the door to the bed. The sheets were disheveled, so Aaron had certainly tried to sleep. Slowly stepping inside, he stared at Aaron’s duffel bag, at the clothes he’d piled onto a sad-looking chair in the corner of the room. It gave Eric at least a little comfort; if Aaron’s stuff was still here, it meant he hadn’t gone far.

Eric’s attention settled on the closed bathroom door. He could hear the faucet running in there, splashing against the basin with a hiss. Exhaling a breath of relief, he closed the motel room door behind him and took a seat on the edge of the bed, watching *The Partridge Family* bop together at hushed volume. The mom and sister were decidedly hot, but the matching powder blue pantsuits tapered their appeal.

After a minute of staring at the TV, Eric shot another glance at the bathroom door. He got up, crossed the room, and gave the door a light knock.

“Aaron? You okay?”

He frowned at the lack of response, then knocked again.

“Hey, come on. Since you’re awake, let’s go to the truck stop, get some coffee.”

Nothing.

Grimacing at the door handle, he slowly twisted it to peek inside. If Aaron was in there, he didn’t want to catch him sitting on the can; but if he hadn’t wanted to be caught in an embarrassing position, he would have responded. The door swung in just an inch, and when Eric peered through the crack he found an empty bathroom. Allowing the door to swing wider, he blinked at the running faucet, a jolt of anxiety electrifying his nerves. An empty prescription bottle lay on the counter. Suddenly, the worst possible thought springboarded into his brain:

He took them all.

Somewhere out there, Aaron was shambling through Ironwood with a stomach full of pills. Eric didn't know what the hell they were, but it made no difference. Pills were pills, and how the hell would he tell Cheri that Aaron was missing, possibly dead?

"Oh Jesus," he whispered.

Twisting where he stood, he barreled out of the motel room and into the parking lot toward his car.

Aaron stood in the center of the living room, his gaze sweeping the walls, the furniture, the pictures on the mantel that had endured decades of neglect. His arms hung at his sides, his shoulders felt heavy, his heart lurched in his chest. The crow lay at his feet, its black feathers glinting in the darkness, still iridescent despite the absence of light.

He didn't understand—not why he had dragged that bird out of the trees and into the house, not why he had been compelled to run back here rather than run away completely. There were things within these walls, things beyond terrible memories and childhood tragedy. Something inside this house had drawn him back, pulling the invisible tether taut, dragging him back to Arkansas from two thousand miles away.

Tilting his chin up to the ceiling, he let his eyes drift shut, released a deep breath, and listened to the silence of the house.

Maybe if I listen, he thought, if I just listen hard enough it'll make sense...

So he listened, waited and listened, hoped to hear the crystal tinkle of Ryder's laughter, listened for the sound of a toy car being pushed across the floor or the opening theme song to one of his son's favorite cartoons. Because if Ryder's name had been scrawled on his car door, if it had appeared on the name patch belonging to that wicked, leering boy, Ryder must have put it there. If the things Aaron was seeing were real, if somehow he was seeing the dead, if that grinning demon of a kid was able to make contact with him, Ryder had a chance to do the same.

But no matter how hard Aaron strained to hear, there was nothing: only the soft murmur of birds nesting in the branches just beyond the windows, hundreds of them frantically chirping, their shrill communal warble rising and falling like an ebbing tide, rising and falling with Aaron's every breath.

Aaron blinked, suddenly breaking his stasis to turn around where he stood, unable to remember how he had gotten home. Someone had given him a ride—Cheri? He furrowed his eyebrows, tingling with the uncomfortable buzz of alarm. Somewhere along the way he had lost a chunk of time, as though he'd ditched his motel room and gotten all the way down Old Mill in a fugue state—asleep with his eyes open, dragging a dead bird inside the house rather than tossing it farther into the trees.

He moved down the hall and into the kitchen, snatched the camcorder off of Edie's old table. Stepping back into the living room, he placed the camera on the mantel beside Fletcher's smiling face, slid onto the couch, and pressed RECORD. Covering his mouth, he stared at the burning red light, his ears straining to pick up every groan of the walls, every creak of the floorboards, trying to hear beyond the starling's song.

He had come to Ironwood to regain his bearings, but instead he had lost his mind.

He thought of the pistol he had tucked away beneath his bed upstairs.

Except the gun wasn't upstairs. It was right in front of him, lying in wait upon the coffee table, its grip peeking out from beneath the pages of his book on grief. Aaron's chest heaved as he leaned forward, his fingers wrapping around the handle of the gun. He tested its weight in his palm, pulled it into his lap, fingered off the safety.

The birds seemed to grow louder beyond the window, as if sensing Aaron's pending decision. Eric was right: it was ironic how Aaron had been plagued by birds after covering his skin with their likeness. Aaron supposed it could have been a coincidence. But the boy who had stalked him from his first day in town—the fact that Aaron was being haunted by a child when, in his mind, he was struggling to finally let Ryder go—that wasn't by chance; something about that particular coupling felt fated, as though it was always meant to be.

Aaron stared at the pistol in his hand, remembering how drawn Ryder had been to birds as well. Evangeline had chalked it up to Ryder wanting to be just like his dad, but there had been something more to it than that. He didn't know what; he just knew it as a feeling he'd get in the pit of his guts—the same feeling he had gotten when Ryder had pulled back and slammed his foot into the ribs of a neighborhood stray. It was a secret Aaron had kept buried since he had been Ryder's age, the very reason he

had turned to work as an EMT. Something inside him itched for destruction. Ryder had had it too; that same dark streak that Aaron had kept from Evangeline.

Leaning forward, he placed the gun on the table, spun the pistol like a top. It whirled around until it pointed his way. He spun it again, and it pointed back at him a second time—a talisman predicting the future.

This is your destiny, it said. You're living beyond the grave. You shouldn't be here. That's the way it was always meant to be.

“Ryder.”

The name slithered past his lips and through the quiet. It flashed across the back of his eyelids like a Vegas sign, scribbled across the dirty plane of his door, blazing red in the center of a name patch sewn onto a pair of kid's coveralls.

But what if Ryder really was here?

What if he was trying to communicate?

Aaron couldn't give in to weakness. After all this time, he couldn't fold.

Abandoning the camcorder and pistol on the coffee table, he rose from the couch and moved to the hallway, opened the closet and grabbed a half-used can of whitewash and brush he'd bought at the hardware store days before. Returning to the living room, he was unsure of his own intent while staring at freshly painted walls, at the clean hardwood floor.

If Ryder was here, he was being drowned out by the kid with the ugly leer.

Aaron would help his son find his voice.

The paint can dropped to his feet.

Aaron leaned down, gave the coffee table a sideways shove.

The camcorder tumbled to the floor, but its little red light continued to burn.

The gun spiraled across the planks, pausing its spin when it hit the dead bird in the center of the room.

He pushed the couch next, leaving a clearing of bare wood. Falling to his knees, he pried open the can and dipped the brush into the paint.

A glob of white dripped from the bristles of the brush and onto the floor, leaving a perfectly pale circle against a rich maple backdrop. Aaron

stared at that singular mote of alabaster, a profound sense of sadness wrapping its fingers around his throat.

He's alone, he thought. Alone in the darkness, while I'm alone in the light.

Or maybe it was the other way around—maybe this world, the one Aaron was living in, was nothing but a shadow compared to the brilliance of the great beyond. Maybe that was why Ryder was reaching out to him, to cure Aaron of his perpetual heartache, to pull him back to the side he had been on for three or four minutes a year before—dead, jerked away from the light by the hand of Cooper, not the hand of God.

The bristles of the paintbrush kissed the floorboards in a long, graceful stroke. After a minute of work, Aaron stepped back to inspect the letters he'd painted onto the floor. Satisfied, he wrote it out again, and again, and again, until the hardwood was covered with Rs and Ys and big-bellied Ds. With his hands covered in paint, he stared at the walls again.

They needed to be labeled to match the floor.

To beckon the dead.

There was another outcry from the birds outside.

Aaron floated down the hallway, stepped into the kitchen, and pulled open a drawer. His fingers wrapped around the hilt of a butcher's knife as old as he was, a twelve-inch monster dulled by age and time, but perfectly capable of sinking into flesh. Seemingly cemented into place, he admired the way the moonlight glinted off the blade. It felt good in his hand—right, like an old friend. He dragged the tip of the knife along the wall as he moved back to the main room, slashing into Edie's old wallpaper, leaving a wavy cut from one end of the hall to the other—a claw-mark made by an invisible beast.

Aaron slid onto his knees next to the dead crow.

Holding the knife at chest level in both hands, he hesitated
what are you doing?

only to bring the blade down with a quick, fluid motion, over and over again.

Dark red oozed across the planks, mingling with the paint that spelled out Ryder's name. Dropping the knife to the floor, Aaron smeared his hands through the tepid blood, moved across the room, and pulled his hands across freshly painted walls.

But it wasn't enough.

A surge of rage combusted inside his chest—anger that didn't make sense but possessed him all the same. Before he knew where he was headed, Aaron was climbing the stairs, his gory fingers dragging along Edie's old wallpaper. He took a left and stepped into his room, his gaze snagging on the dog-eared Bon Jovi poster. Aaron had tacked the top right corner back into place with a small framing nail, but it had come loose again, flopped down in a frown.

Grabbing a trash bag from the corner of the room, he moved to the window, unlocked the latches, and pulled it open. The trees had been close to his window as a kid, but now they were so close the branches practically swept across the side of the house. Trimming them back was on his to-do list, but he was glad he hadn't done it yet.

Ducking his head, he crawled out the window onto the nearest branch, balancing like an expert climber despite not having climbed a tree for a good twenty-five years. He inched toward the crook of the oak, so thick with nests he could practically smell the dander and excrement. The birds didn't react. It was as though they didn't even see him. Aaron was a shadow, a ghost.

He reached forward, jerked an entire nest free, and hurled it into the plastic bag, cinching the top closed before the confused animals could fly free. The bag screamed, the sides billowing out as starlings batted their wings against the plastic. Aaron laughed as the creatures fought for their freedom. Bounding across the branch and back into the house, he gave the bag a fierce shake to agitate his captives a little more—like a mean kid poking an already wounded animal with a stick—wound back, and slammed the bag against the wall.

The commotion beneath the plastic settled to a muted, straining chirp.

Aaron ran down the stairs, nearly whooping as he hit the base floor. Returning to the living room, he dropped the bag at his feet, shoved in a hand, and drew out an injured bird. It flapped weakly against his hand, desperate to make an escape but too hurt to fight. He cupped it in his hands, petted the top of its head, and let his fingers circle its tiny skull before giving it an unflinching twist.

Lifting the bird to his mouth, he bit down, jerking the body away from his teeth. The head came free. He spit it to the floor. And then he pressed

the decapitated body to the wall.

By the time he was finished, the place looked like a murder scene; white walls covered with the smeared, cockeyed letters of a lunatic, the floor a mire of white paint, blood, feathers, and carrion. Breathing hard, he crouched in the center of the room, a pile of mutilated birds at his feet, and then he drew in a breath and began to whisper Ryder's favorite rhyme.

"Sing a song of sixpence a pocket full of rye, four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie..."

Twenty-two

Eric pushed the Firebird to its top speed along Old Mill's straightaway, his foot mashing the gas pedal as he fumbled with his phone. Finally getting Cheri's number up on the screen, he pressed the phone against his ear and waited for the call to connect, but all he got was Cheri's voice mail.

"Goddamnit," he murmured, waiting for the beep to speak again. "Cheri, call me. Aaron wasn't at the motel. I don't know why, but I have a feeling he left to go home. On my way there now. Christ, if he's psychotic or something...I won't know what to do. Meet me out here, like, ASAP." He tapped the screen with his thumb and dropped the phone onto the passenger seat.

Except his message wasn't altogether true; Eric had a feeling he *did* know why Aaron would go back home. The incident with Miles and the baseball bat was too weird, too big to be a coincidence. Because attacking an imaginary boy with a bat, pummeling him until he was nothing but a smear of gore was one thing; attempting to reenact the crime on a living, breathing person was altogether another. There was something wrong with that house—it seemed that everyone suspected as much. The curious kids that would meet on the front lawn on Friday nights, the couples that would make out in their cars while watching the windows for ghosts; everyone felt it, that vibe that was "off" somehow, as though the place was radiating bad energy—bad, yet spellbinding.

Like a beacon, he thought. *Except it's been waiting for one particular person; it's been waiting for Aaron to come home.*

Even at eighty miles per hour, the ten miles it was taking to reach the end of Old Mill felt like an eternity. Eric clamped his teeth against the ticking seconds, suddenly wishing he hadn't pulled his investigative gear out of the trunk and dumped it in the guest bedroom. An EMF detector would have come in handy. An EVP session would have been easy to do while waiting for Aaron to pack a change of clothes so they could get the hell out of that creepy fucking house. He'd commandeer Aaron's camcorder and do a quick sweep before they booked it back to his place, but just as Eric considered how incredible it would be to catch something on tape—the holy grail of the paranormal, a full-bodied apparition—his

foot reflexively jumped from the gas to the brake and slammed the pedal against the back wall of the footwell.

The Firebird's tires screamed against the pavement.

Eric lurched forward against the steering wheel, then slammed back against his seat.

His eyes went wide as he stared into the path of his high beams, a little hatchback smoking and mangled against the trunk of a tree. Eric recognized the car almost immediately. He loved that Peugeot enough to have tried to buy it off of Hazel Murphy a few years back. With some time and money it would have made a sweet project car—an eighties throwback, complete with a cherry paint job and a racing stripe. But now, any hope of resurrecting it to its former glory was gone.

Eric shoved open his door and spilled out onto the street. He rushed to the car and, despite its small size, searched the interior for the driver, but Hazel was gone. He told himself this was good news. If Hazel had been seriously injured, she wouldn't have gotten far. He'd have seen her wandering the shoulder of the road on his way up here, or she'd still be behind the wheel. Hazel's absence meant that she was still alive.

Unless she isn't.

"Hazel!"

He yelled the name into the night, listened for a response, but heard nothing over a ceaseless cricket chirp.

Eric jumped back into the Firebird and blew past the wreck. Maybe she'd gone toward Aaron's place because it was closer than walking into town; but if Eric knew Hazel as well as he thought, he was sure her superstitions were as strong as his own. Aaron's house was the last place Hazel would be caught dead, especially in the middle of the night.

The Firebird roared into Aaron's driveway, skidding on the loose gravel, its front bumper missing Aaron's Tercel by less than an inch. He bolted out of the car and ran up the porch steps, tried the door but it was locked. He banged his fists against a window.

"Aaron! Open up!"

Peering through the sheer curtains, he couldn't make out precisely what he was seeing at first. Something white all over the floor, swaths of red decorated the walls, as though Aaron had changed his mind about the color palette and decided to repaint. The furniture had been shoved to the

sides of the room in reckless disarray. It was only after staring at the scene for a good fifteen seconds that he realized the small lumps of darkness on the floor weren't wadded up rags. The crimson wasn't paint. And the smears on the walls weren't abstract designs.

They were a name: RYDER scrawled over and over on eternal repeat.

"Oh shit," he whispered, his own worry repeating inside his head:

If he's psychotic or something, I won't know what to do.

Aaron was psychotic all right. From the look of that living room, he'd lost it completely. He was inside that house somewhere, and he was bat shit insane.

"Shit, shit, shit." Eric backed away from the window, nearly fell down the stairs as his pulse pounded against his skull. He was suddenly hot, so *hot*, as though someone had cranked the global thermostat in an attempt to burn Arkansas. But he couldn't just leave, couldn't run scared. He had promised Cheri he'd make sure Aaron was okay. Eric *wanted* Aaron to be okay.

Stumbling through the weeds of the front yard, he slingshotted around the side of the house, only to stop short; Aaron's bedroom window was open—the same window they used to hang out of as kids. Throwing the Nerf football back and forth between them, ten points went to whoever could get the football into the house without hitting the glass.

"Aaron!"

Aaron was standing there, staring out the window at the tree just beyond it, as if contemplating taking a flying leap to the yard below.

"Hey!" Eric waved his arms at his childhood friend, but Aaron didn't respond, as if completely dazed.

Like a zombie, Eric thought.

Catatonic.

He'd read about stuff like that; people holding séances and turning into slobbery vegetables, losing their minds between here and the spirit world. He didn't know if that crap had an iota of truth to it, but staring up at Aaron right then, he couldn't help but believe.

He shot a look toward the backyard. Maybe the kitchen door was unlocked.

Or maybe it isn't, and he'll jump as soon as you turn your head.

“Son of a bitch,” he whispered, jerking around to face Fletcher’s shed, never taking his eyes off of Aaron for more than a second. “Don’t move, goddamnit,” he murmured beneath his breath, a command that he knew Aaron couldn’t hear, but he wasn’t sure he’d hear it even if Eric screamed it at the top of his lungs.

Spotting a ladder on its side next to the woodshed, Eric would have to turn his back on Aaron for a few seconds, but he’d be quick; not like he’d be able to catch Aaron if he decided to jump anyway. Eric ran to it and grabbed the old thing by one of its side rails, hefted it up, and dragged it through overgrown bushes and wildflowers. Wrestling with the wooden ladder’s bulky weight, he stood it up beneath Aaron’s window, unable to keep himself from wondering if this was the very same ladder Fletcher had used during his last day on earth. He was too preoccupied to feel the old pine splintering beneath his hands, stabbing the flesh of his palms with shards of weatherworn wood; he didn’t notice that his hands were bleeding by the time he began to climb, the rungs whining beneath his weight but holding firm. His only thought was to pull himself inside the house and block Aaron’s ability to do something incredibly stupid.

He reached the top rung, his bloodied palms smearing red swathes onto the whitewash when he pressed a hand against the house for support. That was when he froze, blinking inside Aaron’s empty room. In the time it had taken Eric to climb up to the window, Aaron had vanished into the dark bowels of the house.

“Shit, Aaron!” He yelled into the shadows, one hand gripping the windowsill while the other clung to the ladder. Looking down at his feet, he tried to figure out how best to climb inside without killing himself in the process. The ladder was rickety. One wrong shift of weight and the rung he was standing on could snap. He considered his footing, then bent at the waist, ready to climb inside, when a cacophony of birds rose up behind him. He turned his head toward the noise, staring into the branches of the oak that stood so close he could climb into its boughs. The starlings were screaming now—a frantic, troubling choir of dismay. That was when he saw it, a kid perched atop the branch that was stretched toward him, a shadow of a boy sitting there like a gargoyle, his hands gripping the bough, his knees pulled to either side of him like a frog ready to spring. His hair was a wild mess of twists and loops, two peaks jutting upward

into the night. Eric gaped at him, unable to make out any features other than a menacing, long-toothed smile.

The kid bounded forward, shambling toward him like some grisly boy-shaped spider, that baleful grin jump-starting his heart, pushing a yell up and out of his lungs.

In his panic, he lost his footing, the sole of his right sneaker slipping out from beneath him. The ladder began to totter to the side. Eric's eyes went wide, his muscles tensing as he held on for dear life—his arms clamped against the windowsill like grappling hooks.

The ladder crashed to the ground fifteen feet below.

"Aaron!" Eric squealed his friend's name, his feet kicking at the clapboards as he struggled to pull himself up. If he fell, best-case scenario would have him crawling away with two broken legs. Worst case—well, he didn't want to think about it.

"Fuck, Aaron!" He yelled for help again, his breath catching in his throat as he shot a look into the darkened room.

Aaron was standing in the upstairs breezeway just beyond the open door. Eric could hardly make him out in the darkness, but there he was, a shadow of a figure, staring at him as Eric struggled not to fall.

"Aaron, help me," Eric said, his plea steadier now—like a panicking parent spurred into calm to keep the situation from spiraling out of control. He exhaled a relieved sigh when Aaron stepped forward. If he hadn't exhaled the air from his lungs, he could have cried out when Aaron fell into a run, could have screamed loud enough to wake Aaron from his daze instead of choking on a soundless gasp.

The flats of Aaron's palms hit Eric's shoulders hard.

Eric cartoon-scrambled for a handhold, his hands slapping the sill, his feet kicking the siding.

He saw Aaron lean out the window to watch him as he fell backward in quarter-time.

There was no flashing of life before his eyes.

No sudden regrets.

No thinking about how he'd miss his mom's meat loaf or who would take care of Barney.

There wasn't enough time.

He simply fell, and once he did, the world went black.

Twenty-three

Cheri was shoving a final few T-shirts into the corners of an already overstuffed suitcase when her phone blipped from within the confines of her purse. Miles wasn't home as predicted, but she didn't want to dawdle either. She doubted he'd do much—maybe spit a few profanity-laced barbs at her—but it wasn't a meeting she particularly felt like having; not yet anyway. There would be plenty of glares and harsh words exchanged between now and when she'd finally get around to hiring a lawyer; again, all issues that she didn't have time for tonight.

Sidestepping the open suitcase laid out on the bedroom floor, she fished her phone out of her bag and stared at the screen. Voice mail. She continued to pack while the call connected, but stopped when she heard Eric's frazzled voice slither from the earpiece.

Aaron wasn't at the motel...

Her heart dropped.

Frenzied, she threw the phone onto the bed, flipped the suitcase cover closed, and knelt on top of it to compress her things. She struggled with the zipper, releasing a frustrated scream when it got stuck at one of the corners. Finally getting it all the way shut, she shoved her phone in her purse, slung her bag over her shoulder, and dragged the suitcase out of the room in a mad rush. She was sure she looked like a lunatic as she pulled her bag along the driveway toward her T-bird. Popping the trunk, she wept as she tried to get that monster into the car, but she was running on adrenaline now. Every minute wasted was a minute of Aaron doing God only knew what in that house—drinking himself to death, shaking an entire bottle of pills into his mouth, tying a rope into a noose.

Finally climbing into the car and throwing it in reverse, she barked the tires against the curb and set sail down the street toward Main, struggling to reach Eric on his cell.

But call after call, Eric failed to answer his phone.

Aaron knelt in the center of the living room, surrounded by white paint and gore. Drawing his hands across the floorboards, he smeared congealed blood onto his already red-stained fingers, closed his eyes, and craned his neck back, exposing the ink-etched wings that decorated his skin.

Someone would come out of the shadows if he just waited long enough, of that he was sure. He didn't know who it would be—Ryder, or the kid with the twisted dark hair—but that no longer mattered.

If Ryder came forward, Aaron would be granted the chance he'd been yearning for for the last year. He'd take Ryder into his arms and rock him back and forth, press his mouth to the top of Ryder's head and whisper the words he needed to say.

I'm sorry, forgive me...

If the grinning shadow-boy came instead, perhaps he'd do Aaron the favor of finally putting him out of his misery. Either way, Aaron and Ryder would be together soon.

Aaron heard what sounded like the ringing of a cell phone somewhere outside. Blinking at the unexpected tone, he slowly rose to his feet and approached one of the side windows. He parted Edie's white curtains with blood-sticky fingers, leaving gory fingerprints against the delicate lacelike pattern that had yellowed and deteriorated with time. That was when he saw Eric crumpled in the side yard. He was lying on Uncle Fletcher's old ladder, his arms and legs splayed out at gruesome angles, a trickle of blood dribbling out the corner of his mouth, his ear.

Aaron jerked away from the glass, his eyes wide, terror tightening his chest, his heart springing into his throat. He didn't remember Eric coming to the house, couldn't recall why he would have been using Uncle Fletcher's ladder to climb up to an upstairs window rather than knocking on the front door. He couldn't recollect any of it, but he knew deep in his gut that he was to blame.

Holding out hope that his friend might still be alive, he hesitated when he spotted what littered the floor: birds—some missing heads, others missing wings, all of them dead. A mew of horror vibrated deep in his throat. He launched himself across the room to the front door, partly to help Eric, but also to get out of that house, but the door wouldn't open. Even after he threw the dead bolt and gave the knob a violent shake, it remained firmly in place, as though nailed shut from the outside in.

He veered around, staring down the hall and into the kitchen, ready to sprint across the house to the back door when he sensed a shift—atmospheric, as though the air had been sucked out of the room.

The slightest breeze drifted across his cheek like the delicate touch of a hand.

He exhaled, relaxed, and suddenly couldn't remember why he had felt so panicked. Had something happened? Had he been running away, or toward something unseen?

Allowing himself to sink back to the floor, he closed his eyes and let whatever was crowding the front room saturate his every pore.

His heart felt as though it were skipping every other beat, each hitch leaving him breathless, as though something were rhythmically compressing his chest—phantom CPR. He was choking, or drowning, or both, an invisible hand wrapping itself around his throat, blocking off his air; and yet, he remained utterly calm.

When he finally opened his eyes, a figure stood in the corner just beyond the window next to the front door.

The shadow stirred, releasing an almost feral-looking child from the center of its darkness, his hair twisted into whirlwinds, his dirty coveralls bearing the name patch that had burned itself into Aaron's memory—red letters against a white background.

It was the boy who had vacantly stared at him through the diner window, the kid who had appeared in the interior shadows of the old high school, the same boy Aaron had bludgeoned with a baseball bat only to see him miraculously spring back to life.

The boy continued to move forward, a ghost of a smile playing at his lips. He stopped only to sweep his gaze across the floor, taking in the dead and gutted crow, the headless starlings that littered the hardwood. When he looked back up at Aaron, that faint grin spread into a sickeningly saccharine smile that seemed to arch from ear to ear.

Aaron's Zen-like calm was suddenly shattered.

Seeing that leer so close, he exhaled a yell and skittered backward across the floor.

He couldn't breathe, both lungs seemingly collapsed inside his chest. He stared up at the kid who now loomed above him, the boy seeming much taller than he should have been.

"Where's Ryder?" Aaron croaked out the question in a dry, breathless whisper.

The boy tipped his head to the side, his smile temporarily muddled by confusion.

“Where is he?” Aaron asked, his tone strained, pleading. “Let me see my son. Just let me see him, or take me to him...whatever you want to do, whatever it takes.”

The boy leaned forward, so close to Aaron’s face he could smell the stench of rotten meat on the kid’s breath.

Aaron winced, squeezed his eyes shut so hard he saw stars, his heart banging around inside the cage of his chest.

With the kid’s face still pulled into that gruesome clown mask of amusement, his hand shot out and grabbed Aaron by the throat. Aaron was yanked forward with inexplicable force, the touch kicking out what little air he’d managed to pull in like a punch to the stomach. He gasped, tried to struggle but he couldn’t move. It was as if the boy had a venomous touch, stabbing him through with an invisible proboscis, poisoning him with a paralytic toxin.

The kid sneered mere inches from his face.

His pulse thudded beneath the crushing grip of the boy’s hand.

The kid giggled as he kept his hold steady, squeezing the last remaining bit of disbelief from Aaron’s veins.

Aaron’s peripheral vision began to blur.

The room closed in as he struggled for breath.

There was a flash somewhere, distant, like a blinking light.

A police cruiser. The whirling lights of an ambulance in the rain. Wet asphalt and crushed safety glass glinting beneath a streetlight. His chest heaving in and out. Something slamming against his ribs again and again.

Aaron surfaced from the dark long enough to see the boy’s face still close to his own.

I needed you once, but I don’t need you no more.

Aaron could hear the words, knew they were coming from the kid despite the boy’s mouth not forming words.

“Where’s Ryder?” Aaron choked out the words, his voice sandpapery hoarse.

The boy leered at him.

Don’t you see my name tag? he hissed.

“Where’s Ryder?” Aaron screamed.

I'm right here, the kid sneered.

But it couldn't be.

It didn't make sense.

I needed you once, the boy repeated, *but I don't need you no more*.

Aaron's eyes widened as the kid pulled back his free hand.

He felt a scream clamor up his throat as small, bloodied fingers danced across his face.

The boy pried Aaron's mouth open with sticky digits, that glint of vindictive mischief ever present in his eyes, and before Aaron could make a sound, the kid's hand slithered past Aaron's teeth, past his tongue and tonsils, down into the blackness of his throat.

No matter how hard Cheri mashed the gas pedal, her Ford wouldn't go fast enough; and no matter how hard she tried to block her fatalistic thoughts, she couldn't help but picture the worst. Aaron had been in bad shape, what with the booze and the antianxiety meds. The fact that he had those meds at all would have made her feel better if he hadn't told her they had stopped working—because what did someone do if their medication was no longer effective? *Spiral into fits of lunacy*, she thought, then momentarily squeezed her eyes shut and whispered, "Oh God."

That was when a single, selfish thought wormed its way into her brain: What if Aaron *did* go insane? What would all that girlish longing and commitment get her—a raving madman still in love with his estranged wife; a hysterical mourner obsessed with the dead? What if, when she got to the house, he had gone completely nuts and had to be sent away? What if he ended up spending the rest of his life in an asylum? Miles was gone. She'd thrown away her life, her security. She'd end up toiling away at Banner's as a cashier—a job Eric would give her out of pity, she was sure—she'd grow old with a fake smile plastered across her face, gritting her teeth down to powder while her every thought would double back to Aaron, to how their life should have been.

She had kept him from disappearing, but he'd slipped away regardless.

She had tried to save him, but she had been too late.

"Don't think like that," she said, speaking into the silence of the car.
"Don't you think like that."

But she had to think like that.

She hated herself for it, but this was her *life*.

She didn't want to spend it alone.

Slowing the car, she squinted at the little hatchback wrapped around a tree. Something about seeing the hood crumpled in on itself ignited her already raging panic. What if whoever had been the driver had crashed because Aaron had run out into the road? What if Aaron had timed it just right, crouched in the trees, waited for someone to drive down that lonesome street so he could leap into their headlights? It seemed crazy, improbable, but was it really? Aaron had tried to end Miles with a baseball bat. He'd bailed out of the motel despite Cheri asking him to stay where he was. He had looked at her as though she had transformed into a monster on the beach of Bull Shoals Lake. She should have called Eric from the motel, had him meet her in front of room number five. She should have never left Aaron alone.

Cheri blew past the Peugeot, her fingers twisting against the wheel.

She took the turn into Aaron's driveway so sharply that she nearly rammed the front end of her car into the back of Eric's Firebird. Cheri slammed her high-heeled shoe against the brake pedal, the car throwing her forward in her seat. She was out the door before it could throw her back.

Eric's here with him, she told herself. It's going to be fine. You're freaking out for nothing.

Except that those thoughts did nothing to soothe her nerves. She ran across the front yard, nearly stumbled when one of her heels stabbed into the ground, and rambled up the front porch steps as fast as she could. She didn't knock, simply wrapped her hand around the knob and gave the front door a push, but it was locked. Balling her hand up into a fist, she banged on the door.

"Aaron!"

Cupping her hands against the window, she tried to see inside.

"Eric? Someone open the door!"

She rattled the window—actually tried to open it like some novice burglar, but it was sealed shut.

It was tough to see in the dark—it didn't seem like a single light was on inside the house—but she could make out that the furniture had been rearranged. The floor was smeared with something, and the walls...

“Oh, my God,” she whispered.

She felt herself totter on the edge of coming unglued.

Unhinged.

Completely freaked out.

Those walls looked like they were *bleeding*.

And then she caught movement through the darkness of the room.

Half-concealed by where the couch jutted away from the wall, Aaron was kneeling on the floor, his shoulders jerking with a strange, spastic lurch.

Cheri cried out when she saw him. He was convulsing, and worst of all, he was alone.

“Aaron!”

Her palms slapped the glass, rings clicking hard against the surface. The name escaped her lips as a breathy, gasping squeal. She threw herself at the door once again, shaking the knob so hard it was a wonder it didn’t come off in her hands.

And where the hell was Eric?

Why wasn’t he inside?

Why wasn’t he *helping her*?

“The back door!” she yelled at herself, rushing off the porch.

She had already decided she knew what happened by the time her shoes banged down the steps. Aaron had taken all those pills—in an attempt to get them to do *something* he’d taken them all, and now he was having a seizure. An overdose. He’d end up biting off his own tongue.

She bolted around the side of the house, her breaths coming in ragged, gasping sobs.

How could this be happening?

The question screamed inside her head.

This isn’t my life, she thought. *This isn’t my...*

She stopped dead.

Frozen where she stood, her urgency to get inside was derailed.

Her throat clicked dryly as she gaped at the body before her, her mouth drawn into a tortured, soundless scream.

Eric lay on his back on the ground, his eyes wide open, his arms and legs sprawled out around him. There was a ladder beneath him—old,

wooden, splintered—one of the rungs stained nearly black as Eric's blood flowed across it before seeping into the ground.

Cheri screamed, threw herself forward. Her knees hit the ground, weeds crumpling beneath the palms of her hands. She grabbed the sides of Eric's face, yelling down at him, hoping to God he could hear her, praying that he was still alive. But Eric didn't respond, not to Cheri's touch, not to his name being screamed over and over again into the night.

The room was shaking, a shaking so desperately intense Aaron was sure cracks would spider up the walls, that the entire house would come tumbling down.

Something had crawled inside.

It was wrenching his ribs apart.

He heard a scream.

Disembodied.

Unable to tell if it was him, or if it was something beyond him.

Weeping beyond the window.

Weeping so racked with emotion it almost sounded like laughter.

Ryder's laughter.

Ryder throwing his head back and guffawing in the backseat of the car.

Aaron's own laughter mingling with his son's before there was no sound.

His teeth hitting something cold.

No light.

The taste of gunmetal.

No world around them.

Aaron's eyes darted open, the boy still holding him captive.

His hand still reaching down
down

down into the depths of his throat.

Wrapping blood-sticky fingers around his soul.

Aaron reached up, coiled his hands around the kid's arm.

Squeezed tight.

And tumbled into the darkness.

Tumbled toward home.

An impossibly loud bang made Cheri jump.

A cry stuck in her throat, cutting off her air.

She stared wide-eyed at the side of the house, processing what she had just heard.

A gunshot.

Her diaphragm spasmed, air filling her lungs in jerky gasps.

It was a gunshot.

Cheri slowly looked down to Eric's face and stared into his open eyes.

This is not my life, she thought.

This is not my...

Twenty-four

Cheri stared up at Holbrook House from beyond the open back of a moving van. Eight months after Eric's and Aaron's deaths, the house blazed in the early-spring sun like a monolith of memory and hope. She would always have fond recollections of the three musketeers playing cards in the kitchen, watching cartoons in the living room, running through the trees that outlined the backyard. There would be bad memories too, but she'd come to convince herself that nothing good could exist without a little heartache.

The house was the last concrete keepsake of the boy who had stolen such a large piece of her heart, the boy who had haunted her for so long, only to come back to Ironwood and assure her he'd haunt her for the rest of her life. But despite the tragedy, the house continued to call Cheri back. Everyone thought she was crazy for wanting to live in it after what had happened—Eric dead in the side yard, Aaron's suicide in the living room, surrounded by paint and feathers and blood. But Cheri couldn't bring herself to abandon it, couldn't handle thinking of it standing empty, housing nothing but morbid fascination. She had seen Aaron's hurt firsthand, the way his mouth had turned down into a frown when she confessed she had crept through the window to relive a little bit of their time together. She couldn't allow that to happen again. Holbrook House had to be saved.

Cheri had reached out to Aaron's wife via his friend Cooper. Cooper had been the one to arrive in Ironwood two days after Aaron's suicide—heartbroken and hardly coherent, a thick woven hat pulled over his matted blond hair despite the summer heat. Most of his time was spent at the coroner's office. A few hours before his flight back to Oregon—a pine box accompanying him on his trip home—Cheri handed him a sealed envelope addressed to Mrs. Aaron Holbrook. In it, Cheri made a plea to buy the house from Aaron's widow. She had no idea how she'd pay for it; all she knew was that she had to save it from another twenty years of loneliness. Aaron would have wanted it that way.

A response arrived in Cheri's in-box a month later. Evangeline Holbrook wanted nothing to do with the house her husband had killed himself in, and she wanted nothing to do with Arkansas.

With this, I'm cutting all ties to my husband's past, she wrote. Anything of his left in the house is yours to do with as you please.

A week afterward, Cheri picked up a piece of certified mail at the local post office. Inside the large flat envelope was the deed to the house. Evangeline had signed it over free and clear.

The flowers Cheri had planted along the side of the house as Eric's makeshift memorial were already starting to bloom; they would serve as a constant reminder of what had once been and what had been lost. She had wanted to hang a childhood photo of Aaron somewhere inside the house but had resisted temptation. It was a huge concession, but it was only right. While the house was a memento of the past, she also had to look to the future.

Cheri took a breath and hefted a box marked KITCHEN out of the truck, then wobbled across the lawn to the front door, murmuring a soft-spoken "Heya, Eric," as she passed the flowerbed marked out with paving stones.

Miles stepped out of the house and met her halfway, taking the box from her just before she hit the porch steps. It was the one thing she knew would bother her for the rest of her life, the one thing that scared her to death. If Miles suspected the baby wasn't his, he hadn't let on, and while she couldn't be completely sure, her gut told her the truth. It was the way the baby stirred every time she stepped inside the house, as though sensing it was home.

Cheri gave Miles a thoughtful smile and let her hands slide across her belly, then climbed the stairs and stepped inside a front room full of boxes and disarrayed furniture. The living room smelled of fresh paint and new upholstery. Miles hadn't been hot on the idea of moving out there—just like everyone else, he thought the idea completely insane—but Cheri assured him that she'd go with or without him. He had finally bent to her will, but not before insisting they get rid of Edie Holbrook's old furniture. Edie's old framed photos had been boxed up and moved into the attic—a move that had made Cheri's heart ache, but she supposed it was just as well. Without pictures, she'd only remember Aaron in the fondest way: the way he had been in their youth—vivacious and always in search of adventure; the way he had looked the day he wandered into Vaughn Mechanical—smiling at her while she struggled to place his face. She'd remember him the way he had looked at the lake, their limbs twisted

together like the roots of an ancient tree, as if they had always belonged together. That afternoon, he'd given her more of himself than she had ever hoped.

Climbing the stairs to the second floor was getting harder by the week. She stopped halfway up to catch her breath, then proceeded up to Aaron's old room. Her father had painted the walls in horizontal yellow and white stripes, and a white crib sat just shy of the window overlooking the trees. Cheri smiled to herself as she crossed the room and slid the window open, the starlings' song brightening the already cheerful space. Miles appeared in the doorway behind her. She glanced over her shoulder at him as he cocked a hip against the doorframe. Sometimes she wondered if he had come back to her because of the baby, or whether he genuinely loved her enough to forgive her past indiscretions. Or maybe he was as afraid to be alone as she was, both of them deciding it was better to live a lie together than be lonely apart.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked—a question he'd echoed at least a hundred times over the past few months.

Miles had tried to talk her out of living in that house by any means possible, from theories of bad vibes and warnings of possible vandals to the fact that people had *died* in there.

It's weird, Cheri. Who would want to live in a place like that?

But she had shaken her head at every inch of his reasoning. She didn't believe in ghosts, and if vandals showed up, Miles was pretty damn scary. All she knew was that Aaron wouldn't have wanted the place to sit empty again.

And as far as bad vibes went, she didn't feel them. Aaron's death had been ruled a suicide—a cut-and-dried case that was later strengthened by Aaron's therapist affirming that his patient had been suffering from post-traumatic stress. There was a video—one that Cheri wouldn't watch for all the money in the world—of Aaron shoving the gun in his mouth and pulling the trigger. He had lost his mind, and he had ended his life. Cheri didn't want to dwell on it; she wanted to move on, to remember him the way he had been rather than the way he had passed.

"We can still get the house back," Miles told her. "Default on the rental contract, kick those people out, put the boxes back in the truck..."

“Kick out a family of four?” she asked him, then gave him a skeptical smile. “Even *you* aren’t that heartless. Besides, this is bigger. We’ll be happier here.”

“And that woman?”

It had been eight months, but every few weeks Harold Murphy and Larry Wallace led a search party through the woods around the house, searching for Hazel. Everyone in town knew it was pointless, but Cheri understood their need for closure.

“There could be a dead body out there.” Miles motioned to the trees. “You want the kid running out there five years from now, only to find a corpse?”

“Now you’re reaching,” she said.

Miles breathed out a defeated sigh and met Cheri at the window, looking out onto the oak close enough to touch. “And these birds?”

“Leave them.”

“They’re noisy as hell.”

“It’s not noise; it’s relaxing. It’ll soothe the baby.”

Miles shrugged halfheartedly and slid his hands into the back pockets of his jeans. She hated how resistant he was to this whole idea. She needed someone to be hopeful with her. If Aaron had still been alive, she was sure he would have been thrilled—a baby, a fresh start.

“And don’t call him *the kid*,” she said, her gaze fixed on the birds beyond the window, fascinated by their numbers. “His name is Isaac.”

She had never been a fan of the name before, but she kept coming back to it every time she stepped through the front door. The house was choosing the name for her, and the more times she whispered it into the empty rooms around her, the more right it felt.

Acknowledgments

Every so often, an author has such trouble with a novel that they're pushed to the brink of madness. For me, this was that book. What started out as a fractured first draft turned into a genre-confused mishmash of a story that simply didn't work, and *The Bird Eater* would have never gotten to its current state without the help of a select few.

To Tiffany, my ever-faithful content editor, you are incredible, amazing, uplifting, and hilarious. Thank you for reading my god-awful first draft and not laughing in my face or telling me to get a job. Thank you for tirelessly reading my endless emails where I ranted and raved and had mini-meltdowns and generally acted like the neurotic writer I try so hard to hide. Let's face it, there's no hiding from you. You, however, can thank *me* for teaching you about murmurations, strung-out crackies, and the fact that yes, you *can* buy liquor at a grocery store.

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And last, but most importantly, to my readers, I'd be a sad little wretch without you. You are my lifeblood. I am forever indebted, and will make payment with story after story so long as you keep reading.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Born in Ciechanów, Poland, Ania Ahlborn is also the author of the horror thrillers *Seed*, *The Neighbors*, and *The Shuddering*. She earned a bachelor's degree in English from the University of New Mexico, and enjoys gourmet cooking, baking, drawing, traveling, and watching movies, and exploring the darkest depths of the human (and sometimes inhuman) condition. She lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico, with her husband and two dogs.

For further reading...

Thank you for reading *The Bird Eater* by Ania Ahlborn. We hope it kept you up at night. While you're awake, please look ahead. We've included an excerpt from her previous novel, *The Shuddering*, to further showcase Ania's dark imagination.

Description:

"Ryan Adler and his twin sister, Jane, spent their happiest childhood days at their parents' mountain Colorado cabin—until divorce tore their family apart. Now, with the house about to be sold, the Adler twins gather with their closest friends for one last snowboarding-filled holiday. While commitment-phobic Ryan gazes longingly at Lauren, wondering if his playboy days are over, Jane's hopes of reconciling with her old boyfriend evaporate when he brings along his new fiancée. As drama builds among the friends, something lurks in the forest, watching the cabin, growing ever bolder as the snow falls...and hunger rises.

After a blizzard leaves the group stranded, the true test of their love and loyalty begins as the hideous creatures outside close in, one bloody attack at a time. Now Ryan, Jane, and their friends must fight—tooth and nail, bullet and blade—for their lives. Or else surrender to unspeakable deaths in the darkened woods."

Sweet dreams,

47North

THE SHUDDERING

Chapter One

Don slapped the trunks of the trees with his left hand as he ran past them, a small ax held tight in his right. He struggled for breath as steam rose from his lungs. As he twisted midrun, casting a wild-eyed look over a shoulder, he was sure he'd see them snapping at his heels, their hard black eyes glinting in the grayness of the morning. He saw nothing—only thin swaying pines bending in the breeze, cutting into the cold blue of the sky, drowning him in their shadow—but Don knew they were there. The drips of blood that trailed him like scarlet breadcrumbs assured him that this wasn't a dream. They were watching him as his legs burned with each footfall, waiting as his boots kicked up snow. The trees shuddered all around him, shaken by an invisible hand. No matter how fast he ran, they were one step ahead of him, obscured by branches and tree trunks and snow, keeping themselves concealed despite their conspicuous movements. It was a game, and Don was their target.

His heart thudded in his chest as he skidded to a stop, his mind reeling as he stared at the blood dripping from the fingers of his ungloved right hand. The throbbing of his arm reminded him that his heart was still beating, that he was still alive; that ax gave him a glimmer of hope. Maybe, by some miracle, he still had a chance. Maybe he could still make it home; he could survive. He launched himself forward despite the pain, stumbling headlong into what he hoped would be escape, unable to wrap his mind around the simple fact that the monsters his father had told him about—terrible stories whispered by the pale yellow glow of a lamp, quiet so that his mother wouldn't scold them both—had been far more than childhood fiction. The monsters of his youth were chasing him. They were hungry. They were real.

It was unbelievable to think that just an hour before he had been sitting at his kitchen table, listening to his wife hum as she washed the breakfast dishes. The only thing out of the ordinary that morning was the bitterness of the cold. Don felt the oncoming storm in his bones long before it hit the news, long before those so-called meteorologists fumbled the prediction. His right knee ached, and that meant more snow—snow on top of the

four-inch base that already blanketed the mountains of southwestern Colorado.

It was the perfect reason to pile firewood high against the side of the house. Don had been lazy for the past few days, spending more time in his recliner watching *Antiques Roadshow* than keeping the place in order. The unseasonable chill meant that the firewood was almost gone, and the throb in his joints assured him that if he didn't get out there now, the impending blizzard would see to it that he paid for his idleness later.

But free firewood was one of the perks of living out in the middle of nowhere. There wasn't anyone to stop a man from grabbing his ax and doing it the old-fashioned way. So he finished his eggs and toast, buttoned up his North Face jacket, tied a hand-knitted scarf around his neck, and pulled a fur-lined hat over his slept-in hair. When Jenny turned to him, she couldn't help but smile. It was coming up on their thirtieth wedding anniversary, twenty-three years of which he'd spent half-hidden by an unruly beard that had turned white with age. It made him look like an off-season Santa, and Christmas was her favorite time of year.

"You be careful," she told him, tightening the scarf around his neck before kissing the tip of his nose. "Don't go chopping off any fingers."

He gave a sideways grin at her warning. Jenny still treated him like he'd never held an ax before, though Don had worked as a logger his entire life. It had been a tough way to make a living, but it had afforded them a nice little house and a full ten acres of unspoiled land. Grabbing his hatchet from next to the front door, he ducked into the cold morning without a good-bye.

His boot caught a buried tree branch and Don skidded onto his front, the snow momentarily blinding him as it blew into his face, stinging his eyes and catching in his beard. Had he known it would have ended up this way, he would have told Jenny he loved her; he would have reminded her she was still the woman of his dreams, always and forever, even today. And Jenny would have rolled her eyes at him and dismissed his boyish proclamations with a giggle and a wave of her hand.

Fumbling back onto his feet, he winced against the burning of his fingers as he swept them through the snow, grabbing hold of his weapon. The tips of his digits were beyond red, a bright magenta Don had never imagined flesh could turn. He'd lost his gloves when he had first spotted

those shadows, obscured by branches but undeniably standing in a pack. Reeling with fright, he had run in the wrong direction—away from the cabin rather than toward it...because they had blocked his path.

The tree in front of him shuddered, and before he could react, one of the things that was tracking him leaped at him from the high branches of a pine. Don instinctively swung the ax over his head as the creature bolted for him, lodging the blade in its monstrous skull. The thing fell at Don's feet, convulsing, teeth clacking together as it bucked in the snow, giving Don his first look at what these creatures truly were. The twitching savage looked just like his father had described: all awkward angles, nothing but skin and teeth. He didn't think to pull the ax free from its skull when he stumbled away, desperate to put distance between himself and his childhood nightmare, the snow beneath the beast soaking up red so dark it nearly looked like oil. He reeled around, ready to run. And that was when he saw them, lined up like undead soldiers just beyond the trees, still hidden by branches as if afraid to come into full view. Don couldn't see them outright, but he could make out their shapes: skinny, sinuous, terrifyingly tall.

They only come when it snows, his dad had told him, repeating the stories his own father had whispered into his ear in the dead of winter. As a kid, Don assumed it was why he and his family packed up their stuff and left the cabin when the weather got bad. But as he grew older, he reasoned the stories away. Myth. Legend. Whatever he called them in the past made no difference.

The snow buffered all sound save for the haggard shudder of his lungs. His pulse whooshed in his ears as he tried to take in everything around him, every possible angle from which he could be attacked. Steam crept past his lips, coiling upward like smoke, making it harder to see. When the convulsing beast finally went still, something in the air shifted. Perhaps that was why the creatures had been keeping their distance. They had been watching, waiting to see the outcome of Don's attack on their comrade. But when that monster's movements went static, Don's blood ran cold. A low, unified growl sounded from the trees. It rattled deep in their throats, an eerie, almost human quality to its tone.

It may have been smarter to stand motionless, to play dead. But Don didn't think.

He turned and ran.

Twisting against the bulky padding of his coat, he was shocked at how difficult it was to move, having completely forgotten how tough it was to trudge through the waist-deep snow. He tried to slog through it as quickly as he could, his breaths coming in panicked gasps, the growling behind him rising in volume, becoming more aggressive, like the grunts of wild boar, the snarling moans of chattering hyena.

He was still running the wrong way, away from home rather than toward it, but they had left him no choice. He'd circle around, get back to the house, save both himself and Jenny—

Oh god, my Jenny.

She was alone.

She'd be afraid.

She'd be waiting for him, chewing her fingernails, wondering where he was.

He had to get back to her, had to keep her from stepping outside to search for him. He had to survive to save her, had to get back...had to—

Something hit his right shoulder.

He spun around like a top, lost his footing, and fell into the deep powder that covered the ground. Scrambling back to his feet, Don instinctively grabbed at his right arm—fire seizing his biceps, snaking up to his shoulder—while he searched the trees for the creature that had buzzed him, that had clawed him so fast he hadn't even caught its approach. The winter chill bit through the slash in his sleeve, down puffing out of the tear like a tiny cloud, almost immediately turning red from the blood that was sheeting down his arm. *Oh god. Oh Jesus.* He pulled his hand away from his arm, his fingers slick, sticky with red.

The damn thing could have taken him down, but it hadn't. They were toying with him, playing a game of cat and mouse. He was still alive, left to fend for himself.

Inside his head, his daddy leaned in and whispered, *They never let anyone get away, Donnie.* Inside his head, Jenny screamed, *Run!*

Balling his hands up into fists, his left hand sticky with gore, he released a primal yell and ran. The trees whizzed by him. For a moment he felt incredible—as though he could outspurt anyone, *anything*. His adrenaline numbed the pain, the fear. It numbed the terror and pushed him

forward, away from home but inexorably toward it. If he could outrun these bastards, he'd eventually get there.

His feet flew behind him as he leaned forward, leading with his head, a constant stumble as his legs failed to keep up with his body. Catching a shoulder on a tree, he grunted in pain but kept on, knowing that stopping would seal his fate, knowing that those things—those savages—were waiting for him to give up.

Fuck them, he thought. Fuck them, whatever they are.

But after a minute of his running flat out, that sense of invincibility began to fade. His pace slowed. His legs grew heavy. His heart thudded in his ears. He could hardly breathe, the glacial air burning the lining of his lungs. *No, he thought. Get back to her. Get back home.* But his legs stopped working. His knees went rubbery. His mind screamed, *Keep going*, but his body was spent. He ducked behind a tree as the snapping of branches echoed all around him. Jamming his shoulder blades against the trunk, he tried to make himself as small as he could, his bottom lip trembling, his vision going wavy with defeat. The longer he stood there, the more silent the woods became. That horrible, unified, groaning growl had faded. The trees failed to shake, and eventually the crack of branches ceased. The forest went ghostly quiet.

Opening his eyes, he dared to peek around the side of the pine at his back.

Nothing.

Could they really be gone?

He blinked, his arm burning with pain. It was impossible. He knew he hadn't outrun them. The one that had darted toward him was faster than anything he'd ever seen, running so fast it seemed to glide over the snow. *Maybe they found something else*, he thought. Something else to devour. Something else to kill. Because that was what they were doing out here—hunting. At least that was the story. That was what his father had said.

He was afraid to move, sure it was a trap, but he couldn't stay there long. His arm felt as if it were on fire. The blood that had overtaken the inside of his sleeve was seeping out from around his cuff, rolling down the inside of his palm, dripping onto the colorless ground cover next to his boot. If he didn't bleed to death, they'd smell him and come back. He had to move.

So he moved.

And crashed into the chest of a beast.

It had been waiting for him, utterly silent in its stance, its lips pulled back into a sneer, exposing a collection of jagged teeth in a maw that opened impossibly wide. He didn't have time to take in the horrifying view, hardly had half a second to take a backward step as it flared its nostrils, ready to strike.

It leaped.

Don screamed as he fell backward, the beast's teeth sinking into the side of his neck. Pain bloomed beneath his jaw, simultaneously hot and cold. He struggled, beating the creature above him with his fists, kicking his legs, bucking to free himself. The thing growled, a foul gurgle rasping from the back of its throat. And then it shook its head like a dog, tearing flesh, snapping tendons. It pulled away, mouth full of soft tissue oozing blood onto the snow.

Don gasped for air, his eyes wide as he watched the demon chew a piece of him, throwing its head back and swallowing the meat that was missing from his neck. Letting his head fall backward, he closed his eyes, squeezed them shut, and imagined himself back in his kitchen, back in front of Jenny as she kissed the tip of his nose. He pictured her hands, soft despite their years. He sucked in a breath of cold air and smelled vanilla. She was always baking something, her cakes and cookies making their tiny two-bedroom cottage forever smell of a five-star bakery. She loved music, always humming Bob Dylan and the Beatles beneath her breath. Don could hear her singing in the startling quiet that surrounded him now, humming just beneath the weakening rattle of his lungs.

"You think I haven't seen worse than you?" he croaked, the sound of his own voice sending a shock wave up his spine. He sounded rough, inhuman. "You ugly son of a bitch." Attempting to stand, he had to pause. Vertigo rocked him back and forth. Something warm filled his throat. He coughed, and blood bubbled from between his lips. When he finally managed to look up, he was alone again, the shadows of those creatures watching him from the safety of the pines. "You fucking cowards," he hissed. "Come out and fight!" Crashing to his knees, he pressed a cold hand to his neck, then pulled it back as though he'd just scalded himself. Half of his neck was missing, nothing but a void. He coughed again, a

thick slew of blood dribbling down his chin into his beard, his gored hands leaving prints in the snow.

“You ugly sons of bitches,” he repeated, choking, feeling himself start to slip. With his final wind, he forced himself to look up at the growling shadows of the hidden demons. “Take me, then,” he hissed, extending his arms to his side like Jesus on the cross. Because if he sacrificed himself, perhaps they’d be satiated enough to move on, to distance themselves from his home, from his wife.

They fell on him, but Don didn’t feel a thing. He was too busy picturing Jenny in her wedding dress, twirling in the sunlight that filtered through the stained-glass windows of a tiny church. He was too busy listening to her hum, her singing blocking out the silence of winter, distracting him from the tearing of his own flesh.



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