



Mercury

A Novel

Amy Jo
Burns

Mercury

ALSO BY AMY JO BURNS

Shiner

Cinderland

Mercury



Amy Jo Burns



This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

MERCURY. Copyright © 2023 by Amy Jo Burns. All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America. For information, address Celadon Books,
a division of Macmillan Publishers, 120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271.

www.celadonbooks.com

The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Burns, Amy Jo, 1981– author.

Title: Mercury / Amy Jo Burns.

Description: First edition. | New York : Celadon Books, 2024.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023028554 | ISBN 9781250908568 (hardcover) |

ISBN 9781250908575 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3602.U76486 M47 2024 |

DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20230710

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023028554>

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use.
Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at
1-800-221-7945, extension 5442, or by email at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

First Edition: 2024

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my sister and brother

Reader, they've set a place for you at the table.

"You're welcome," the mother says.

—MAURICE KILWEIN GUEVARA,
"Late Supper in Northern Appalachia"

Mercury

1.

Waylon Joseph crouched behind Mercury's ballfield bleachers on the south end of town, smoking a cigarette and hiding from his wife.

A day moon hung in the June sky as a crop of boys played a baseball game beneath it. Tiny mitts waved in the air as the ball soared wide. The rest of the park stooped beyond the field—a moldering pond, a slanted gazebo. I-80 beckoned just down the road and past the cedar trees, and yet Way couldn't hear even one truck's sorry bellow as it sped past.

The air around him felt thick, like honey and longing.

Waylon tapped the edge of his Salem with his finger, and ash fluttered to the dirt. *Today*, he told himself. *Today you have to tell her*. He'd said the same thing yesterday. The day before, too. Every day since he'd visited the bank.

Marley appeared between the bleachers' rusted planks—the burnt-orange patina slicing her right through her middle. In her pink coach's ball cap and cutoff jeans, she didn't look a day past eighteen, when Waylon had fallen in love with her. She'd been somebody else's high school sweetheart back then. Now, her auburn hair tangled in the breeze as she hoisted her

hand toward the sky, and a field of eight-year-old boys waited for her to speak.

"Look alive," she called toward the outfield.

A crack split the air as the other team's batter hit a pop-up. The center fielder snatched the ball, and the inning ended.

Way leaned his forehead against the bleacher's hot metal. It had taken only two words from Marley's mouth to snap the boys to attention. She had such sway, and she couldn't even see it. In the last eight years, so much of their marriage had become about power—who had it, who gave it away. A slippery, constant leveling of the scales.

Marley cheered and took a nearby toddler from the crowd onto her hip, simple and sunny, as if life were one endless summer afternoon. Even her toes were painted hot pink. Waylon stank in his tar-spattered work clothes and boots. Other fathers, men Waylon went to high school with who had the balls to sit in the stands rather than cower behind them, clapped as Way's son emerged from the dugout. *Good eye, good eye*, they cawed as the ump called two balls in a row, their eyes never leaving the jut of Marley's hip in her shorts, the rise of her legs in the heat.

Vultures, Waylon thought. *Every last one.*

Unaware, Marley popped a fresh stick of spearmint gum into her mouth. She held a hopeful ember in her eye as her son took the batter's box, as if he had every virtue Waylon lacked. And he did, their boy. Theo was freckled and adventurous like Marley, loyal without cause. He swung at bad pitches like his heart had never been broken, rounded the bases as if time would never run out. Just like Waylon had always wanted to be.

The field was still wet from yesterday's rain. Theo tapped a metal bat against his cleats to clear dirt from the spikes, as Waylon used to do when he was young and itching to swing for these same fences. Back then, George Bush Sr. had been president and invaded the Middle East. Now it was 1999, and the president's namesake had just announced his plan to run for office and finish the war his father had started. It was unsettling, how rituals like that passed from father to son.

Theo was now part of a long tradition in the Joseph family of children who had been disappointed by their fathers. Mick Joseph had never

attended any of Waylon's baseball games. He was too busy slapping a fresh coat of paint no one wanted on every picket fence in town and belting out the wrong lyrics to "Bad Moon Rising." Now, though, Way wondered whether Mick had been there after all, lurking behind the bleachers like he was. Waylon once vowed Theo's future would be different, with a dad who sang over him and rejoiced.

Funny, how those things never worked out.

A cloud passed over the sun, and a third strike shot past Theo's ready bat and into the catcher's mitt. He ran toward his mother. Marley whispered in his ear, bumped his fist with her own. As Waylon watched them, his heart felt dry and chapped. Theo looked just like Marley when he laughed, even if Way couldn't remember the last time she'd done it.

He drew a hand down the length of his face and imagined the kind of family the two of them made while he was up on the roof. At twenty-six, he and Marley were still young enough to mend what they had torn. As he watched his wife run her palm against Theo's cheek with such tenderness in her fingertips, he almost believed it to be true.

Way, she'd said a long time ago as they lay in bed together on a cold winter night, and he should have listened. *I think you're right to be scared.*

Waylon was about to light a second Salem out of self-pity. Then he heard a stark trilling.

The pay phone behind him shivered through the quiet air, and the entire crowd looked toward it. A curious event: a pay phone ringing, like a snowfall in July. For Waylon, it was an omen. He knew it was his brother Baylor hunting him down, ready to demand he fix whatever their father had done now.

As a war vet and self-appointed mayor of Mercury, Mick Joseph was a living monument in town. Just yesterday, he lurched through the streets in his gray Astro van with a ladder dangling off the top, holding up traffic when he halted to fetch the glasses that had flown off his head and into the road. If it were only that, Waylon wouldn't sweat it. But his father had built so many things in his life that he never bothered to take care of. Houses, marriages, sons. He made people laugh. He also took whatever he wanted. Mick was dapper, and devil-stained, and draining as hell.

Waylon wondered which neighborhood widow he'd horrified this time after penning her the same tired love note and banging on her door at four o'clock in the morning with a sad bouquet of geraniums he'd filched from his own lawn. What bill had he refused to pay—water, or gas? Had he interrupted the Presbyterian preacher again, by standing up in the middle of the sermon to slap his paws against the keys of an upright piano?

Everyone agreed he needed to be caged. No one but his three sons was expected to do it.

Waylon, brutally cursed ever since his mother christened him the “steady” one, knew the task would fall to him. He felt it in the weight of the small golden cross she'd hung around his neck when he was ten and that he hadn't taken off since. Baylor—the tallest and oldest by thirteen months, the watchtower and lookout—had no such trinket from their mother. He knew how to signal trouble but never how to avoid it. And Shay Baby, the youngest at nineteen, was still his daddy's best boy. Much like Theo, Shay held all his father's wishes, and none of his regret.

This left Way to clean up the mess, just the way he had when he was a kid in Mick Joseph's house, and Mick spilled a glass of milk without bothering to sop it up. Waylon hated it now as much as he'd hated it then. Yet Way, safe and sure, still itched to perform his part. He, out of all the brothers, would be the last to give up. The Joseph name still meant something to him, even if he was no longer certain what that something was.

Waylon ignored the pay phone as it jangled on its hook. Someone hit a line drive, the first baseman snagged it for the third out, and Marley's team took the field again. Was it the fourth inning, or the fifth? Way couldn't recall.

Marley turned toward the bleachers, and he ducked his head before she had the chance to spot him. From behind the stands, he could choose her over and over, even though she still thought he'd chosen someone else when it mattered most. Still looked at him with betrayal in her eyes. That was the truth of them: trading hearts and shifting loyalties. Trying to hold on, bare-gripped and barely there.

The pay phone halted its ring, only to begin again.

As a bear might pull himself from winter sleep, so Waylon stood and

stretched before sauntering to the pay phone, the scorch of fifty pairs of eyes hot against his back. He picked up the phone mid-ring. For the first time, Baylor's voice on the other end of the line didn't mention their father at all.

Mick Joseph, who hadn't had enough money to attend college so he read through a set of encyclopedias instead, liked to say that a man is proved a fool by what he doesn't know. Yet a crueler outcome, in Waylon's case, was to be proven a fool by what he thought he knew, but didn't.

Way thought his own secrets were the worst in the Joseph family, but he was wrong.

Ten minutes later, Waylon met his older brother where he'd requested—at the entrance to the only Presbyterian church in town. Mercury had other denominations to offer—Methodist, Baptist, Catholic—but this was the only house of worship the Joseph family had devoted themselves to since 1970, when Mick returned from Vietnam. Baylor leaned into the doorframe, his black hair dipping into his eyes, his nails rimmed with tar from the jobsite at the Chinese restaurant two towns over. His skin never burned in the bright sun the way Waylon's did, so he often went shirtless from May to October, musculature on full display, announcing to every woman between twenty-two and forty that he was untarnished and unattached.

He'd thrown on a T-shirt from his father's business, navy blue with white block letters. JOSEPH & SONS ROOFING was plastered across the front of it. The company's title always unsettled Way because of its untruth. The "sons" were the ones who showed up for work, and not Mick Joseph as the name promised.

Weak Waylon and Big Baylor. That was how Mick referred to his two oldest children when they worked together on a roof. All his life, Waylon had wondered whether it was true.

Baylor never paid those things any attention, just as he didn't mind his boots tracking dirt through the house. He had a crowbar in one hand, a shovel in the other.

"Let's get this over with," Baylor grouched as he held the door.

Together they walked into the cool dark of the church stairwell, where

the interim pastor sat in his own sweat. He'd been stuck in Mercury since the last pastor had an affair and skipped town four years earlier. The term "interim" sounded like an indictment, as if the church couldn't get anyone to come without the promise that they'd also get to leave. The last time Way had spoken to this man was the worst day of his life, and he didn't care to remember it.

The pastor's name was Lennox, and he looked up at the sound of them.

"I know we should have fixed the roof long ago," he said. "I know."

Lennox led them into the sanctuary, and they passed the carved baptismal font that Mick had built, a woven tapestry of the Apostles' Creed embroidered and hung by Waylon's neighbor. This church had preachers come and go, but it survived because it had the people of Mercury's guts in it. Folks in town scrubbed it, decorated it, patched it, married their sweethearts in it, baptized their children in it. The building stood for a spark of the eternal in an ending world, though Waylon never felt his own mortality more than he did when he sat in these pews.

Lennox explained what had happened.

Earlier that day, the church mothers were teaching summertime Bible lessons in the chapel when cold sludge began to drip from the ceiling. Clumps of plaster fell on the children's laps with a splat. Rainwater had leaked from the steeple above them, casting a deep bruise across the saintly white ceiling of the sanctuary.

"Why is it so . . . purple?" Baylor asked, as drops dribbled onto the crushed velvet pews. They'd need to be steam-cleaned before Sunday, the musky stench strained from the air.

"We'll fix it," Waylon promised, without first seeing the leak itself, which he knew his brother would hate. Their father loved making guarantees, too-good-to-be-trues. It was painted on the side of his Astro van:

THERE'S NO LEAK A JOSEPH CAN'T FIX

His boys had been brought up to see this promise through.

"Don't expect a discount," Big Baylor spat, "just because you're a church."

He grabbed the side of his neck and squeezed, which Way knew he

only did when he felt anxious, as in—hardly ever. A pale, hook-shaped scar lay just below his ear, the only part of his body that didn't tan. Bay was itching to get up in that attic. Get his hands dirty. Ruin it so he could make it right.

So Waylon got to work.

Inside the sanctuary, the purple wave continued to spread. Outside against the brick facade, Way mounted his steel ladder, with no one to mind the base.

"Be careful, son," Lennox called from the open window.

Once astride the roof, Way scampered up the slick slope to a flat patch just below the steeple that rose into an ornate bell tower. Sure enough, a puddle had formed below a bit of copper flashing that had been stapled to the roof. Way ran his hands through it, pushed the water till it slid down the incline. He could see the water seeping beneath the slim metal toward the steeple joists, felt how the wood beneath it had gone soft. All of it would need to be torn out and replaced.

He scaled down the ladder and peeked his head through the sanctuary window.

"You should have let us fix this ten years ago when we told you it was time," Baylor was lecturing Lennox, even though Lennox hadn't yet lived in Mercury back then. Baylor, whose usual interface with customers was little more than an adenoidal growl. He stood on a ladder of his own and nosed the stain with the curve of his crowbar.

"It's the flashing," Way called. "It leaked."

Baylor smirked.

"See for yourself," Way said.

And just like that, the brothers switched. But this time, Way stood back to look at the vast room before him. As high as this ceiling was, the base of the steeple reached even higher. The answer to his question lay in the space between the ceiling and the roof.

"What's up there?" he asked Lennox, even though he knew Lennox wouldn't know.

He took the crowbar to the back of the sanctuary and opened the tiny door that led to the counting room where the weekly offering was

kept. He looked up and found the same purple swirl on the low ceiling, with a hatch. A hatch like that meant an upper room waited beyond it.

The opening had been painted shut years ago. Specks of dried paint hit Waylon's face as he took the crowbar to the edge and pried open the lip. Bay yelled something to him from the other side of the wall that Waylon couldn't hear. He felt a sudden breeze.

Way believed in haunted places, not because he was a Christian, but because he was a roofer. His whole business was revealing stories untold, ones that hid until they began to leak.

A collapsing ladder unfolded before him, and Waylon boosted himself into the crawl space. Then he took his Zippo from the back pocket of his jeans, next to his cigarettes. Flicked it. That's when he saw them—one, then two, then ten bats fled into the sanctuary. Way fell from the hole and landed with a smack on the floor.

"Should I get a BB gun?" Lennox asked, curls of silver hair falling in his eyes.

"No," both Waylon and Baylor said as Bay appeared and pulled Waylon to his feet.

"Easy as shit to get rid of those bats," Baylor lied. "Leave the windows open tonight and they'll do the rest."

But then a leaking burst forth. A burbling stream of dark liquid shot out from the hatch and onto the floor. At this, even Lennox cursed.

"What is that smell?" he asked.

Waylon was accustomed to stench, but this one he couldn't place. Once again he pulled himself into the upper room and felt around with his hands.

"What's all this fabric?" he asked, yanking a bit of it into the light below. It was damp and stained his hand purple. "The color is bleeding."

"Looks like old choir robes," Lennox answered.

Seating himself on a platform at the edge of the opening, Way reached down a hand that waited for Baylor to toss a flashlight into it. He spread the light through the space until it illuminated a petrified hunk. A rank odor pulsed from it as it lay on top of a heap of choir robes. Whatever it was, it had been in there a long time.

Way began to feel queasy. No other exits existed, as far as he could tell. Beams stretched from the platform all the way to the ladder that led to the bell tower. One misstep, and someone would fall right through the plaster of the sanctuary ceiling. The stink had been roosting there undisturbed since before the attic door had gotten painted over. Waylon handed back the flashlight and wiped his palms on his jeans.

"Call Patrick," Way said of the local rookie cop, who moonlighted with town sanitation because crime in Mercury was scarce. Patrick was Shay Baby's best friend and not even old enough to drink. "A shitload of bats died in here."

As he said it, the hardened chunk of bat carcass slid off the fabric heap in one disgusting piece. Beneath it hid a large object spooled tightly in plastic. Way squinted. Felt his stomach churn. He pulled at the plastic, and the whole thing rolled off the mound of robes toward the hatch and halted at its edge.

"Shit," Waylon said, and tumbled off the ladder.

All three men stared at what lay above them.

At the attic opening, something sinister appeared inside the plastic. The knob of a wrist, the bend of a shriveled hand.

Waylon looked to Baylor, who had shut his eyes. A beat passed before he opened them, and Way caught a flicker of the brother Baylor had been only once, past midnight, splayed out on the carpet of their house with his palms shaking in the dark. Way could still hear the visceral pleas plunging from his mouth—*please, please*—the dial tone of a telephone tossed to the floor. Waylon knew nothing about the truth of this body above him, only the chronic ruin it reminded him of. Baylor coughed, his bloodshot eyes ranging across the sanctuary until they landed on Waylon's and held. What hung in the air between the brothers wasn't what had died at their hands, but what still lived.

Lennox made no move for a phone. Waylon made no move toward the door.

With a sniff, Baylor righted himself and thrust his crowbar over his shoulder. His scar hovered above it like a broken halo.

“See?” he said as he stalked into the hall. “You should have fixed the roof when we said.”

Before Waylon found the church stairwell, and then the harsh sun, he found a cool floor to press his head against in an empty bathroom. Then, he threw up all over it.

2.

Shay Joseph missed the news of the leaking chapel because he wasn't where he was supposed to be. Then again, he hardly ever was. If his brothers needed to find him, he reasoned, they knew where not to look. He lazed on the floor of the abandoned apartment in the attic of his father's great house on Hollow Street, fan turning far above him, his favorite piece of beach glass tucked tight in his grip. The gray carpet beneath him had gone matted and flat. His mother's old paperbacks still lined the bookshelf to his right, their bindings so cracked and faded that he couldn't even read the titles. These novels were the only items of hers left in the house, because this was a room no one else ever visited.

The rest of the Victorian that sprawled beneath the attic had always felt like a dollhouse to Shay, with its bright front porch that Mick made him repaint every spring. Shay, the beautiful son, was charged with the window dressings. *Make it look pretty, make it look clean.* They were all marionettes in the house Mick Joseph had built, dangling from his fingers, jumping to life at the flick of his wrist.

Shay hid in the empty apartment when he didn't want to see his brothers. It was more and more frequent these days, this desire to be lost and

never found. He was nineteen years old, blond-haired and emerald-eyed, and coming apart at the seams. Not because he'd made more promises than he could keep, like Waylon, or because he wanted to be left alone, like Baylor, but because he felt forgotten, and being forgotten was safer for Shay than being seen.

His mother taught him that.

Beneath him, the front door groaned. Theo's laughter followed two sets of footsteps, then a clang shot through the air as his bat and mitt hit the foyer floor. The sound withered as he headed toward the kitchen at the back of the house. Shay's nephew had come home with Marley, who was Shay's favorite person in the world. He loved his brothers, truly, but sometimes he didn't like them much. They looked at him and saw one thing: a roofer. Or a Joseph, to be more precise, which to them was one and the same.

Marley, though? She was the only person who looked at him and didn't predict his future. Shay wanted so very much to learn how to remain in the present like she did, to tie a rope around a moment and pull it tight. Marley looked at Shay in a way his mother never had, even before she'd lost her mind.

At that, Shay chided himself. The sheets hanging over the old furniture around him tussled in the fan's breeze like phantoms. What a heartless phrase, *lost her mind*, as if it were his mother's fault, as if it hadn't been stolen from her along with everything else.

Shay slipped out of the dark apartment and found Marley downstairs in front of the stove. She had tucked a sack of rolls beneath her arm like a football, the cordless phone caught beneath her ear. When she lifted her arm to press a button, the rolls came loose and toppled out of the bag onto the floor.

"Hell," she said as she bent to retrieve them.

"Language," Theo called out from the living room, where he was trying to balance in a headstand against the wall. "Grandpa wouldn't like it."

"Grandpa," Marley muttered, "can go f—"

She glanced up to find Shay in the corner, and her face broke into a grin. There was Marley, ever hopeful, blossoming like a summer bouquet.

He leaned down to fetch the last of the rolls and asked about the baseball game. Marley took a can of Diet Coke from the fridge.

"You know how they say some years are for rebuilding?" she said, popping the tab.

"Sure."

"Whatever step needs to happen before you can even build the first time—that's where we are."

Shay placed the rolls on the counter. "Well, they say fundamentals are key."

"*Super* key."

He laughed. "I don't miss playing in those Little League games. They're so long."

What Shay meant to say, but didn't, was that his whole boyhood had felt too long, one with too many rules and not enough mercy.

Marley took a slow sip from her can. "Theo looks just like you out there," she said of her son, who had wandered toward them in search of a snack. "Bored."

"Makes sense," Shay answered. "He's the baby of the family now."

"Hey," Theo called out. "I could beat you in a race right now, old man."

"Try it, kid," Shay teased as Theo shimmied himself onto the counter and then jumped onto Shay's back. Shay twirled him in a circle.

"Mom," Theo said as he spun. "When can we eat?"

That was Theo, the youngest of the Josephs: always climbing things, always hungry. Always assured that his needs would be met. Marley was making dinner for six, as she did each weeknight for everyone who lived in the house on Hollow Street. None of the Joseph men, other than Shay, bothered to tell her when they'd appear. Tonight was spaghetti, Shay's favorite.

He moved toward the fridge to mix a salad, Theo hanging from him like a cape.

"They're gonna know, you know," Marley said as she stirred the sauce. Shay stilled before the open refrigerator door.

"Know what?" he asked.

"That you didn't go up on the roof today," she added.

At that, Shay relaxed. He had a choice then to reach for honesty, but he didn't take it. It happened often in this kitchen where Marley and her doe eyes offered an open invitation. With her, he could lay his burden down, if only for a moment. What Marley couldn't promise, though, was privacy. No one in the great house knew the meaning of the word.

"I don't mean to correct you"—he smiled—"but I haven't been up on the roof all week."

"Your dad will only have odd jobs for you for so long."

Shay grunted. "He thinks I'm his errand boy."

"It's so hard," Marley joked, "being the favorite son."

Shay smiled, even though the truth made him sad. He was beloved because he favored Elise Joseph in appearance, his round face and dimples, the curled cowlick in his light hair. To be the favorite son was to be mistaken for Mick's younger self, mixed with flecks of his wife. Mick didn't know the real Shay at all.

The phone rang; Shay lifted it from its hook. Listened to the voice on the other end of the line.

"A body," Shay repeated. "Who?" He waited, and then hung up.

Marley's pasta had boiled over. She ignored it, even as the water pocked the stovetop. "What is it?"

"It was Patrick." Shay ferried Theo to the couch in the living room before returning to the kitchen. "They found a body up in the church attic."

A ghost drifted between them.

Marley was stunned. Shay stole the question from her lips. "No identity yet."

He bent beneath the sink, grabbing a face mask and a pair of thick gloves. "Looks like I'll be working today after all."

He made light of it, but Shay felt sick. This was why he had no hint of remorse for lately roofing only when he chose. He was the baby, the ham, the family prize. He could make even Baylor laugh, and no one ever asked for anything more. As he was the youngest by eight years, everyone in the family still thought of him as a child. The Josephs expected so little of him when he had so much to give. Shay knew how to kid because he knew how sadness could fall swiftly, like a hatchet to the heart. But the shadow

side of it—that phone call in the night, that begging like it’s a last wish, that cleaning of Waylon’s puke because of what his sensitive body couldn’t stand—this was where Shay took the wheel every time. Dug every grave, kept every secret, mourned every misfortune. He loved like no other, like he knew the pain of being cast off.

Shay loved best when he said, *Show me your worst thing. I promise I won’t look away.*

When Shay pulled up to the church in a white work van and cut his headlights, his best friend, Patrick, sat in the twilight grass just outside the manse. The two of them were still kids by some measures, high school graduation only a year behind them. Now they had the jobs of presumed adults, even though it still felt like dressing up in their fathers’ clothes. Shay and Patrick had wrestled together, smoked together, almost dropped out of school together before Patrick decided to become a cop. He belonged to a family of veteran policemen, all at his disposal, but there was only one person he trusted.

“It’s bad?” Shay asked, sitting beside him. The gas station’s marquee light flickered at them from across the street.

“Your brother puked all over the bathroom floor.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Shay joked, because the look on his friend’s face snagged him like a fishhook. He touched Patrick’s shoulder. “Tell me what you need.”

“You and I are going to go empty out that shitty attic.” Patrick ran a hand down his jaw. His tawny beard was little more than a shadow, and Shay wondered whether he’d grown it just so his fingers would have something to fuss with. “Then we’re gonna clean the sanctuary floor,” Patrick went on. “I don’t want anyone else to see what I saw in there. Or smell it.”

Shay stood, extended a hand, and pulled Patrick to his feet. He rose slowly, huskier than his friend and not as spry.

“We’re gonna be up all night,” Patrick said.

“I know.”

Like Shay, Patrick liked to clean. In any other place, it might have been a wonder how two innocents like them were entrusted with such a grim

task. Yet Mercury—a shrunken steel industry outpost—had always been a town that thrived on less than it needed. It had no medical examiner, or CSI unit, or even a chief of police. Right now, what this town had to rely on were these two boys. They would have to be enough.

Together, they walked into the dark.

They dealt with the body first, which was doused in rainwater. The friends handled the sopping spool of plastic like it was the Ark of the Covenant. It took both of them to get it down the ladder. It surprised Shay how numb he felt as they loaded the corpse into the back of an ambulance that hadn't bothered to leave the engine running.

Patrick sent the body off to the morgue, then the real work began.

Using a flat broom, Shay swept every last thing out of that attic onto a tarp below. When he'd almost finished, he spotted something that glittered on the filthy planks. He bent to examine it.

It was a ring.

Patrick watched him, a question in his eyes but no words on his lips. Typical, Shay thought, the way Patrick studied him without comment. Sometimes Shay wanted to grab his friend by the shoulders and shake, just to get him to speak.

Shay turned his back as he stuck the ring in his pocket.

Patrick hauled the refuse to the back of his cruiser. Then Shay found the turpentine, got on his knees, and scrubbed the sanctuary's center aisle where plaster and sludge had fallen. It was three days till Sunday, and the church needed to be good as new by then—or as good as it used to be, at least.

Patrick and Shay scrubbed, dried, and scrubbed again. Just before dawn, they finished. Shay sank into a seat along the aisle and eyed the deep purple wave on the ceiling. A bat fluttered about and then disappeared.

"We'll have to paint over those water stains once the plaster is fixed," he said. "And I'll ask Marley to help clean the cushions."

Patrick nodded but didn't leave.

"What's bothering you?" Shay asked.

Patrick's forehead creased. He looked foreign in the low light, and frail. "You mean besides the dead body?"

"Yes," Shay answered softly. "Besides that."

"It's just—" Patrick blinked, then tried again. "There was something rotting here, all this time. And none of us knew."

Shay nodded, though he suspected someone did know, and they'd chosen to say nothing.

Patrick left him alone in the dark of the sanctuary, and Shay lay down in a pew and closed his eyes. He didn't want to return to the house on Hollow Street with this ring burning a hole in his pocket.

Had it fallen off the body? Had it come from somewhere else? Shay didn't know, and he was afraid to find out.

Marley Joseph ate dinner alone that night. She settled into the love seat with her plate of spaghetti and rested her feet on top of Elise's embroidered pillow. Her mother-in-law would have hated the sight—bare toes on the cushions, a plate of food in the living room. Marley ate with a guilt she still couldn't shake.

Waylon hadn't called. Neither had Bay, or their father. The quiet curled around her like a stray cat. She didn't mind being alone, especially when it happened so rarely. Marley didn't even mind that she'd prepared food no one would eat. What she did mind was that the home she'd tried to build for herself didn't belong in this house, and it never had.

Theo had nodded off on the couch with one of Shay's old comic books spread across his chest. Marley still remembered when Shay was young enough to fall asleep in just the same way, on the same plaid sofa. They'd all lived under one roof together for eight years now. What did it mean, Marley wondered, to be married to one Joseph, but wife or mother to them all?

The only thing she'd never been in the Joseph house was a daughter.

She let the leftovers go cold in the pan. Taking the phone into the closet so Theo wouldn't hear, Marley called her best friend, Jade, at her apartment above Mercury's only beauty salon.

"Holy shit," Jade hissed when she picked up the phone. "Did you hear about the church attic?"

"I did. All three Joseph sons got called in."

Then Jade whispered the words Marley didn't want to. "At least it's over now," she said.

Marley pinched her eyes shut. "Tell me we did the right thing."

"Marley," Jade said, a soft warning in her voice. "You know there was never any 'right thing' here."

"I just wish—" Marley paused. "I wish I knew if I should have tried harder to be a daughter, or harder to be a wife."

This was the tender part of Marley that she never let the rest of the Josephs see. The part that questioned her every action, the part that bled. Before Jade could respond, the front door opened. Marley said goodbye to Jade and stepped out of the closet. Waylon stood before her, too weary to ask why she'd been hiding with the winter coats.

He was filthy, his hands painted dark purple. Way lingered in the foyer, looking like a charcoal sketch of himself—fading and blurred. He had black hair like Baylor, green eyes like Shay, and a shopworn heart that was all Waylon's. Her husband had been disappearing for a long time, and Marley had no idea how to bring him back.

She'd loved him not because everyone turned his way in times of crisis. It went deeper than any performance he'd been brought up to give, any debt he thought was his to pay. Waylon had no ego, and he was never too proud to ask for help. She loved him because she knew that under threat of emergency, when Waylon was so often called the hero, there was one person he reached for, and it was her.

Marley went to her husband, did as she'd always done, and made his stains, his pain, her own.

Before

3.

In June of 1990, Marley West and her mother blew into Mercury in their teal Acura with the windows down and the radio blasting. They came from eastern Ohio, where they'd accidentally left their favorite casserole dish and a Blockbuster movie card that had nine punch holes in it. There was no Blockbuster video store where they were headed, only an auto parts shop that also rented out movies on the side.

They hung left off Route 80 East, down an exit that led past a streak of cedar trees to a lone stoplight. On the far side of the road, Marley spotted three men standing atop an empty building, seventy-five feet in the air. Their silhouette cut a virile vista against the trees. The air stank like tar and sweat, and Marley rolled up her window. Tapped her neon fingernails against the passenger's-side window to the beat of Roxette on the radio, crossed her bare ankles on the dashboard.

Marley usually loved the rush of driving into a new town for the first time. She liked to hunt down billboards, ads, even the font on street signs—any static object that might hint at the story behind a city. But here, on the outskirts of Mercury as she and her mother idled at the red light, the only

sign she spotted had been hand-painted onto the van parked outside the barren building they'd just passed.

THERE'S NO LEAK A JOSEPH CAN'T FIX

Roofing, Marley thought to herself. *How boring.*

When the light turned green, she had no reason to glance back at those men working on the roof in the rearview mirror.

The next afternoon, she wandered toward the park from the new apartment her mother had recently secured to see what else a town like Mercury might have to offer her. At last, she found wooden signs boasting of local businesses in heavy, white print—Cook's Hardwood, Rotary Club, Joseph & Sons.

She also found lazy summer, relentless sun, and a pitcher on the baseball field. A casual pickup game was underway, where the umpire smoked a stogie and spat tobacco juice from his mouth between every pitch. Marley took a seat on the bleachers' top row. The eager fans cheered when the final out was called, and she watched as two young men in the outfield embraced each other—or what she assumed was an embrace, at first.

"Those Joseph brothers," someone in the stands muttered. "The only boys I've ever seen who fight when they're on the same team."

As she peered onto the field, Marley put two and two together. She'd seen the Josephs the day before, pitching slabs of stony asphalt off a roof as she rode into town.

They could have been twins, with their V-shaped torsos and dark hair, though one was larger than the other. The bigger Joseph—Baylor was his name, Marley had heard from the fans—whispered words that only his brother could hear. The younger one, Waylon, paused. His face blushed like a beet as Baylor strutted away from him. Then Waylon sprinted after him, pinned him to the ground until Baylor punched up, lifting his brother before crashing his body to the ground. Their teammates didn't dare interfere. If there was any talent these boys had beyond baseball, it seemed it was found in their fists.

Marley couldn't believe no one put a stop to it. The people around her

busied themselves by tidying a tumble of stray baseballs into a pile by the fence. The brothers grunted and gasped. A boy in the stands in front of her, no older than ten, touched his mother's shoulder and pointed to the outfield. Her head snapped up, and an eyebrow arched with it. The boy brushed a long, blond curl out of his eyes and took a coiled comic book from his back pocket, sliding his gaze over his shoulder toward Marley as if to say, *Can you believe we came all the way here for this?*

As if she were already part of this world.

Marley clambered down the bleachers to climb the fence and force the brothers apart, but the mother's firm hand yanked her back to the ground.

"Boys," she called out toward the field. Her voice belted like the low notes of a bassoon. "Enough."

At that, the fighting ceased. Waylon stood, wiped blood from his lip, and reached a palm toward his brother. That quicksilver moment found in the reaching, just before they joined hands? That was the moment Marley thought she fell in love.

Baylor reached her first. After trouncing his brother, he tipped his bat over his shoulder and caught Marley's eye. He looked surprised, then a little alarmed, and then he tried on a smile that looked more like a sneer.

"You're *new*," he said, as if he'd never heard the word. His eyes were so lavishly blue.

"Maybe." She didn't return the smile, didn't budge from her spot along the railing. Her mother had taught her the importance of caution.

In Ohio, no one kept watch over her. Danger was found in a girl walking home alone past midnight, the moment she stepped into a stranger's car and was never heard from again. How quickly a life could fizzle into a portrait on a milk carton. Here, though, people were already listening. She felt them slinking around her, stepping closer one foot at a time. They'd witnessed Baylor seek her out, and now they leaned in.

"You look like you need a ride home," Baylor said.

"And you look like you're twenty-five."

His face had been so immovably stern that Marley jolted when he started to laugh. His shoulders shook, and his bat fell to the dirt as he leaned on it like a cane. This stoic tree trunk of a human had started to

relax, and it was Marley who had done it. She'd never had that kind of power before.

Baylor pointed toward the sun. "That's what happens when you spend the summer on a roof. Turns you into an old man at eighteen."

Marley thought he was joking, but his smile faded. It left no laugh lines behind.

"So," he said. "The ride?"

Baylor's stare turned fragile as he asked the question, framed by the black hair clinging to the thick cords of his neck and the mountainous set of his shoulders. Around him, the women in the crowd—mothers, daughters, sisters, all—didn't spend their gazes trying to slot Marley or wonder why she'd appeared on her own. They didn't look at her and ask who was missing. Instead, they narrowed their eyes at Baylor as if he'd already disappointed them.

The apartment Marley shared with her mother was just on the other side of the cedar trees, and she didn't need a lift. Yet she accepted the ride anyway, because it seemed Baylor very much needed to give her one to earn back some goodwill.

"Sure," she said.

Baylor jutted a chin toward a Chevy in the gravel lot that had a giant ladder hanging out the back and a license plate that had been drilled into the tailgate.

"Fancy," Baylor said as he began to walk away from the field.

"What?" Marley asked.

"That's the name I gave my truck," he answered, tossing the words over his shoulder. "Fancy."

Marley laughed and followed, turning only when the woman who'd stopped Baylor from fighting called out his name in the way only a mother could.

"Baylor," Mrs. Joseph said, somehow already close behind them. Her pleated dress kicked up in the wind, revealing a set of maroon heels. The only colors Marley had seen in the park that day were shades of fluorescent and black, the hues of homemade jerseys and biker shorts. Mrs. Joseph

flourished in lake tones, the nutty brown of her shoulder bag like a cattail against the sweeping blue of her skirt.

Marley had never seen someone so beautiful, and also so out of place.

Her blond hair was fastened low at her neck, and the thick coat of mascara on her lashes hadn't smudged, despite the heat. Marley found a bewitching glamour in the way she had styled herself needlessly for a ball game—the unapologetic luxury of it, a defiant indulgence in daring any speck of ballpark dust to make its home on her shoes. Mrs. Joseph didn't appear wealthy—Marley could see she'd stitched a small tear in the sleeve of her blouse—yet she was rich in stature. A line of fellow mothers formed behind her, prepared to vie for her attention once she'd dealt with her oldest son.

Marley's heart quickened at the way this woman commanded attention with a single word. *Baylor*, she'd said, and that was enough. Marley hadn't known many men in her life, and even fewer who would listen when she called.

Marley watched as she took Baylor by the arm.

"You know you can't fight like that with Waylon," Mrs. Joseph said. Her eyes weren't condemning, as the crowd's had been, but beseeching. Invoking a selfhood in her son that others couldn't see. "He won't shake it off the way you do."

She'd scolded quietly, and Marley felt she'd intruded on an intimate moment between mother and child. She took a few steps away, training her eyes to the small billboards by the line of cedars. An arguing couple came into view just behind the Joseph & Sons sign, a man waving his houndstooth hat at a woman who stood in front of him in a long sundress with her arms crossed.

As a girl without a father or a sibling of her own, Marley had studied family arguments like these in beach reads and afternoon movies to understand the shape of what she didn't have. This couple, for example, had one-sided disagreements. The Josephs were the close kind of family that fought in equal measure but didn't know how to make up.

And Baylor was the flinty kind of young man, Marley had started to

gather as she watched him looking hangdog before his mother, whom everyone feared and nobody liked. Waylon was likely just the opposite, and the boys didn't get along, sure as they were tied together by blood. Marley, though, didn't fear Baylor. Not when he had a mother who spoke to him like that.

"Sorry, Ma," Bay offered, kissing her on the cheek.

Mrs. Joseph looked to Marley and waved her over. "I'm Elise," she said. "You must be new in town. Are you alone?"

Having been asked this question many times since she was young, Marley still felt the need to stand tall, defend who and what she was, and never bow her head. "My mother is working," she answered.

Slowly, Mrs. Joseph nodded. "Welcome to Mercury," she said.

Marley took Mrs. Joseph's outstretched hand and embarrassed herself by holding it for a beat too long. She felt that same heat from the fierce gaze Elise trained on her boys as it spread between their joined palms, as if this woman could intuit how long Marley and her mother had been alone, and why they'd arrived in Mercury with so little in the trunk of their Acura.

Before, Marley had been a stranger. Now, she was not.

Elise released Marley's grip, a wisp of her blond hair escaping its bobby pin. "Be good," she said to Baylor as she turned away and reached for the hand of her youngest son. "Let's go, Shay Baby."

Shay had been sitting cross-legged in the gravel until his mother called him. When he came to his feet, he looked at Marley with a sidelong grin. Baylor promised Elise he'd be home for dinner. Marley noticed Waylon then, still red-faced and downcast, slouched against the chain-link fence with his glove limp at his side. He'd scored the winning run and caught the ball that ended the game, yet there he sat, defeated.

It gave Marley a savage kind of ache.

Soon, Shay fit himself beneath his brother's arm and ribbed him until Waylon began to laugh. Marley watched them as they followed Elise toward the tan Lincoln parked on the other end of the lot.

Baylor took her by the elbow.

"What did you say to him?" Marley asked.

Baylor didn't answer.

Marley stopped at the Chevy's hood. "What?"

"I said what needed to be said," Bay said as he tore open the passenger door. Then he paused, his fingers still gripping the handle. "Do you ever feel like the rest of the world is trying to save everyone but you?"

Marley frowned. It was a question she'd never considered before. "I'm not someone who needs to be saved," she said.

Baylor slapped a paw against the side of his truck.

"And that," he said, his face near to hers as she climbed inside and he hung his head through the open window, "belongs on a billboard."

The light flecks in his eyes seemed to flicker. He was rugged and misunderstood in ways Marley thought she could comprehend. This was a new sensation for her, the opposite of being overlooked. She didn't need to shout her existence here to be noticed. There was no mistaking the way Baylor wanted her, even if he didn't know her at all.

"What's your name, anyway?" he asked.

"Marley."

He didn't offer his own name in return or ask how she'd discovered it. Baylor Joseph—sexy and severe—was accustomed to being known in just the same way Marley was used to remaining anonymous. Bay hopped into the driver's seat and turned the ignition. Then he circled her wrist with his fingers, drew her slowly toward him until her hand rested on his bare thigh.

His eyes settled on hers with not a question in them but a dare. Marley didn't pull away. The warmth from his leg called forth an animal self out of her, one that was unrepentant and untamed. This, she craved. Closeness, skin on skin. The promise of touch. Fire in someone's eyes when he looked at her.

Marley liked slogans and advertisements because they got attention. They were direct and refused to be ignored. Was it the same to be desired as it was to be seen—to be wanted, and to be understood?

She felt an exultation in finally releasing the burden of loneliness, and when Bay smiled again, Marley bit her lip. She already understood that he didn't give his smiles away freely, and somehow, she'd earned them. Baylor

parked in an alleyway behind her apartment and lost no time in kissing her. His hands in her hair, his teeth on her earlobe. His urgency disguised itself as valor when he whispered her name.

Baylor's stubble scratched her throat, and Marley opened her eyes. She spied Elise's Lincoln in the side-view mirror, creeping by with her two other sons in the backseat. Elise looked straight ahead, yet Marley swore somehow she had seen them. Somehow, Elise Joseph had known.

4.

Seven days passed before Marley got an invitation to dinner at the Joseph house on Hollow Street. It was now July, and even in early evening the sun shone through the wide dining room windows, casting angular shadows on the floor.

It seemed there had always been a place for her at the Josephs' table, even before she appeared. She took the empty chair beside Baylor, across from Waylon and Shay, with Elise on the far end. Marley would have been seated next to Mick, but he hadn't come home yet for supper.

The five of them waited silently in their seats for his arrival as the grandfather clock ticked in the corner. Shay drummed his hands on the table. Baylor sighed, angrily. Elise turned off the oven, and Waylon watched at the window.

Ten minutes passed, then twelve. At six fifteen, a man burst through the back door, covered in grime and wearing a short-brimmed hat with a band of houndstooth ribbon around it. He plopped into his chair, looked at Marley askance, and she knew where she'd seen him.

On the day of the ball game and behind a billboard, this man had been arguing with a woman Marley had assumed was his wife.

It wasn't.

Marley stared, and Elise placed a casserole dish in the center of the table.

"Mick," she said. "Your hat."

He took off the hat and hung it on the back of his chair, and Shay tried to pass Marley the stewed green beans. She couldn't look away from Mick, who shared the same fierce jaw as his sons, the same roughened fingertips.

"It's called steep asphalt," Shay whispered to her from across the table, thinking Marley was eyeing the grit on Mick's blackened hands. "From the roof."

There it was: an occupation, a destination, a Joseph family birthright.

"Like, shingles?" she asked.

The whole table laughed.

"Nah," Baylor answered. "We do low slope roofs on commercial buildings. Industrial rubber for mills, hospitals, warehouses."

"Sounds complicated," Marley said, glancing at Elise at the other end of the table, who sat primly in her chair.

"All you need to roof," Mick addressed her for the first time, lifting his gaze from the day's crossword Elise had left by his plate. Then he took a gigantic pause.

"Not this again," Baylor said.

"Please don't say it, Dad," Shay Baby pled.

"All you need to roof," Mick went on, undeterred, "is a pair of scissors and a caulking gun."

"And a crane, and a crew, and a shit ton of gravel," Waylon said into his glass of water, but only Marley heard.

"I saw your billboard at the park last week," she said, snagging Mick's eye and refusing to let go. "I think you were there, just behind it."

The words stopped Mick dead. His face puckered as he held tightly to his fork, its tines spiking the air.

"Who is your father?" he asked Marley, and she heard someone gasp.

"Mick." The name slashed out of Elise's mouth like a whip.

Her sons sprang to life. Baylor slapped a fresh helping of chicken divan

on his father's plate. Shay offered to paint the shutters. Waylon cleared his throat and stood to hang Mick's hat on the coatrack.

All this, just to distract the man at the head of the table from saying something inappropriate. Marley had never seen such a feat.

"My father's gone," she answered plainly. "Not dead, just gone."

Silence swept through the room. Elise had stood to fetch a water pitcher from the kitchen, but she didn't move. Baylor looked away, and Mick began to chew.

For a long while, he was the only one at the table who ate.

Then the doorbell rang, and Mick rose from his seat. Once he disappeared into the hall, Elise took a bite. The rest of them followed until Mrs. Joseph stood to clear the plates. When Mick called for Baylor to help him in the hall, Shay took a breadbasket into the kitchen, and Marley and Waylon were left alone.

He inspected her, and he didn't smile. It surprised Marley to realize that she didn't need him to. There was generosity in Waylon's frankness, as if to say—*This is what we are, and I won't hide it from you.*

"I'm sorry," he said. "We try to keep him from saying things he doesn't mean."

The apology felt like a door the rest of the family had left for Waylon to open. He was predictable, and mild, and safe—everything that Mick wasn't. Waylon's eyes were green and adamant as he made amends for his father's potential misdeeds.

"It's all right," Marley answered. "I don't care what he thinks."

And truly, she didn't.

"He never comes to the baseball games," Way added. He fingered the gold chain at his neck. "So you must have seen somebody else."

She was about to press—to lean into the same honesty Waylon had given her. But down the hall, the air filled with a dissonant clang.

"That sounds like someone pounding on a piano," Marley said.

Way stood. "I think it is."

She followed him toward an open room off the foyer. A Victrola stood by the entrance next to a wingback chair that had a clarinet sitting on top of it. The burgundy rug at Marley's feet had been upturned. Sure enough,

at the far end of the room, Mick sat at the helm of a battered piano. He'd put his hat back on, tilted to one side.

"Mick," Elise said, coming up from behind. "The floor."

The wooden planks beneath the rug had been scuffed as Mick and Baylor dragged the small piano in from outside. Mr. Joseph didn't respond to his wife. Instead he ran his fingers along the keys, from the highest register downward, the notes cascading like a waterfall. It was out of tune, and brassy, and the keys buzzed each time Mick's foot hit the pedal. But as he started to play "Moonlight Serenade," his whole body leaning into the lilt of his fingers as they slid against the ivory, the music beguiled the entire room.

Mick closed his eyes, his face intent on the swell of the song. Here, he listened. Here, he felt no need to speak. Could this be the *real* Mick, Marley wondered, and not the angry man she'd seen at the park? Elise rested her head against the doorframe, and Shay settled beneath the piano, his body caught in the instrument's thrum. Waylon took the clarinet from the chair so Marley could sit, and when the final chord hung in the air, floating like snowfall even after Mick's foot left the pedal, Marley felt a split so deep in her chest at the beauty of the sound that she had to look away.

It was then she saw that Baylor had slipped into the hallway and sat on the stairs, his back to them all, his elbows crossed over his knees—troubled by either the new presence of the piano or her own, Marley couldn't tell. Baylor, who had sought her out at the ballfield only to ignore her once she stepped into his house, chose to remove himself as a member of the family at the very moment Marley started to become one.

August arrived, and Marley began eating dinner at the Josephs' home every night. She figured the open invitation meant she and Baylor were dating, even though the only places he'd ever taken her were his family's dining room and the passenger seat of his truck. Marley didn't mind. The great house seemed to have endless rooms and hallways to explore, one giving way to the next. It could never be fully understood, not in the way Marley's one-bedroom apartment declared its simplicity. Easy to move in, easy to move out—just as she and her mother wanted.

Her mother, Ruth, was a nurse, and she worked a long day shift in addition to overtime to cover their expenses. The commute was long, but the rent in Mercury was cheap.

"Seems like a place we could stay," Marley's mother had said when they first drove through town. But for the Wests, "stay" usually meant a year and not much more.

Ruth loved to tell Marley about all the wild things she'd done as a teenager—how she'd hitchhiked to the Newport Folk Festival, how she'd dyed her hair blue. Now she never missed a bill payment, and she kept an old coffee can of change by the microwave so her daughter would be able to find enough lunch money in the mornings. Ruth didn't date much and didn't complain; she still listened to Stevie Nicks on vinyl and sang "Rhiannon" into the fake microphone she made of her fist. Marley admired her mother for it all—her resolve, her foresight, her ability to jump-start her life over again and again.

Their story before Mercury wasn't different from many others': a single mother, a father who didn't stay. A new beginning always beckoned at every city limit. To Marley, her mother was a god who never tired, had an endless wellspring of love for her child, and served late-night bowls of popcorn in front of the TV for dinner.

Marley would never admit to wanting the mundane objects that signaled a stable life: a mailbox, a library card. Yet she felt a constant pull toward the Joseph house, which was full of things not so easily moved. For Ruth, who was queen of all women—and for Elise, who seemed to rule all men—Marley would eat dinner twice.

It had been a sultry summer—Mariah Carey's "Vision of Love" on the radio, Arsenio Hall on late-night television, power outages spreading across the country due to the heat. After July had passed with nights spent fooling around in the Chevy's passenger seat, Baylor wedged between her and the parking brake, Marley attended church with the Josephs for the first time.

It was Shay who invited her.

"You can sit next to me," he'd said. "And count how many times the preacher says the word 'sin.'"

Congregants made way for them as they filed into the sanctuary, Mick at the head of their train and Shay Baby just behind Marley at the rear. They squeezed into the second-row pew, all six of them in a space that was meant to fit only five. The AC was on the fritz, and Elise folded a fan out of her paper bulletin. Together, they began to sweat.

More than once, the pastor said the magic word and Shay made a tally mark on the back of the pew with a tiny nail. More than once, Elise stilled her husband's jiggling knee and wrapped her arm through his to keep Mick from adding his own thoughts to the sermon. Marley tried to catch Baylor's eye, but they'd entered the chapel in such a way that Waylon had ended up between them.

She felt Bay sulking as he slumped into the cushion, remaining there from the call to worship, through the offertory, to the benediction at the service's end.

As soon as Elise stepped into the aisle, a band of women surrounded her to thank her for the casserole she'd dropped off, for the ladies' Bible study she'd organized, for the winter coats she'd donated to the local shelter. She placed a firm hand between Marley's shoulder blades and brought her into the fold.

"Let me introduce you to my best friend, Ann," Elise said, tapping the person to her right on the shoulder.

Ann wore a linen Laura Ashley dress and twisted her hair with a rhinestone clip. She was just as stylish as Elise, yet without any of the clout. Ann crossed her arms tightly as if she were freezing in the room where everyone else was sweating, and there was no doubt about it.

This was the woman Marley had seen arguing with Mick at the park.

"Are you a Presbyterian?" Ann asked, her voice like a robin's in a bird-bath.

Mick stood at a distance, casting his aloof stare in the opposite direction.

"I—I don't know."

Marley was flustered and couldn't think of an answer. Her mother had told her they belonged to the Church of the Holy Comforter, which meant they used their Sunday mornings to sleep in. Marley had never

been swayed by religion before. But as the bell tower above them struck noon and everyone in the sanctuary paused at its force, she felt for the first time the amnesty that religion might offer to someone with a damning secret, the respite from some constant, gnawing need.

Baylor, though, felt no such pull toward faith. After barely speaking to her at church, later that evening he appeared outside her apartment door as the sun disappeared in the sky, drove her to a hill that overlooked the ballfield, and slid a palm up her shirt.

Marley stilled his hand. The greedy glint in Baylor's eye reminded her of the hunger she'd felt all around her that morning as the church prayed from Psalm 51 and asked God to grant each of them a clean heart. Baylor wanted something, it was clear. She was no longer sure it was her.

"What do you want, Baylor?" she asked.

His head reared back, though Marley couldn't see his eyes in the darkness. "What do you mean?"

"Tell me what you want."

He tried to laugh but coughed instead. "I want exactly what you think I want."

"I don't think you do."

She tilted her head and waited. Marley's mother had taught her that what people say is often not what they mean. *Are you alone*, Elise had asked her. *Are you a Presbyterian*, Ann wanted to know. *Who is your father*, Mick had demanded.

Marley didn't want to be someone who could ask a question and yet not offer her own truth. She wanted so much to use the right words, to line them up, to let them self-declare.

"I think," she said slowly, "that no one in your family says what they really want."

"Oh?" Baylor's lip curled. "You're an expert now, is that it?"

"Tell me, Baylor."

"I want—" He paused, gripping the steering wheel with his fists. "I want you to want me."

The admission rattled him, and he stared at her, wild-eyed, like a rabid dog caught in a snare. He screwed the truck's ignition and they flew down

the hill, not stopping until the brakes squealed in front of Marley's apartment building. She asked no questions as she stepped out. Before she even had a chance to shut the door, he'd driven off into the dark.

Baylor had never taken her on a date. Never bought a milkshake with two straws, never tucked two movie ticket stubs into his pocket, never even called her on the phone. Somehow he knew how to find her only when he wanted to, like hunting down a doe on the first day of the season. He knew how to cinch a wound with his hand and stitch it up with his mouth—but he didn't know what to do when someone told him he was bleeding, too.

After that night Baylor stopped picking Marley up, only a month and a half after they met. Stopped finding her on the far side of the cedar trees or driving through the alleyway where she lived. He hadn't found someone new, as far as she could tell. He was nowhere. Bay had towered above her like thunder on horseback that day they met, and just as briskly, he'd gone.

As much as Baylor might have needed someone to miss him, Marley didn't. She missed the family dinners instead.

Mercury

A Novel

Amy Jo
Burns

ORDER NOW