

TOGETHER WE ROT

S K Y L A A R N D T



VIKING

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



First published in the United States of America by Viking,
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2023

Copyright © 2023 by Skyla Arndt

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission.

You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

Viking & colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Visit us online at penguinrandomhouse.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 9780593526279

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

[Vendor name]

Design by Opal Roengchai

Text set in Garamond MT Std

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

To metamorphosis

And so God damned the garden along with man.

CHAPTER ONE

WIL

“It doesn’t count as evidence if you were *stalking* them, Wil.”

Sheriff Vrees has been kicking up a storm since I waltzed through the door, but he lets out another groan for good measure. We’ve got a weekly ritual, the two of us. I’ve spent the last year digging into his ribs like a thorn, looming over my mother’s missing person case, and he’s spent the last year looking into early retirement.

“You can’t solve crimes by committing your own,” he says flatly. Every day, I parade into the Pine Point police station with new clues; he dismisses them, and then we duke it out for fifteen minutes. Today, we’ve made it to the second minute of our scheduled banter.

I slap my hand on the counter. He’s lucky there’s a barrier between us. I’d love nothing more than to leap over it some days and throttle him. “So you admit what happened was a crime?”

His co-workers don’t bat an eye behind him. They’re used to this song and dance. They’re also too busy not doing their jobs: chatting among themselves, wadding papers to toss into faraway cans, slurping coffee, and snacking on doughnuts. Overly stereotypical crap. Anything to egg me on, I guess.

One of them is fiddling with the radio and playing tinny Christmas music over the warbled speakers. I don’t care how much Michael Bublé plays or how hard the snow falls beyond the glass windows—I’m not in a holly-jolly mood. There’s a limit to my patience and we’re at the end of

it. My mood today is best described as five seconds away from physically assaulting an officer.

“For the last time, Ms. Greene, there is no sign of foul play.” His fingers lock together, the way they always do when he’s absolutely livid, just barely keeping his shit together. I’ve done a number on him in a matter of twelve months: Weathered eyes, black hair streaked through with gray, a family of premature wrinkles carved into his skin. “We’ve looked into your mother’s case. Tirelessly. Endlessly. All signs point to your mother leaving town voluntarily.”

Behind him, the wall is a boring wash of pale yellow. It bleeds together with the rest of the office. With him. Muted and dull and unremarkable, Sheriff Vrees is about as bland as they come. He’s a lukewarm TV dinner or a mindless Saturday afternoon, the kind you spend with your eyes glazed over and the local news playing quietly in the background.

He’s shown more emotion in the last couple months than he ever has in his life. He should thank me for that.

I tap a nail-bitten finger on my photo. How I got the evidence shouldn’t matter. “*I’ve also been looking into it, Mark.* Tirelessly. Endlessly. And look what I’ve found.”

The photo I took shows the beloved local preacher—the one seemingly as untouchable as God himself—in the woods beyond his house. Shadows dampen the image, soaking the details of the scene into a blurry haze. Despite this, there’s enough moonlight to carve the unmistakable silhouette of him with his hands around a hare’s throat. Pastor Clarke had snapped it in two and the blood is staining the ice red.

Sheriff Vrees’s eyes glaze over the image for a measly second. “I don’t get it.”

I scoff. “A man sacrificing an animal out in the woods isn’t weird to you?”

“Sacrificing? *Pfft*. With that logic, everyone in the UP is in a cult.” To prove his point that ritualistic animal sacrifice is a popular pastime in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, Vrees nods toward the photos on his desk. Next to a portrait of his pregnant wife is a hunting shot. Vrees with a ruddy red nose, standing in front of a deer stand and grinning proudly beside an animal carcass.

“Seven-pointer,” he says, humming to himself.

“What a beast,” Officer Mathers calls from his computer. He’s not even looking into anything important on the screen. The bastard’s playing a round of solitaire. And losing, at that.

My patience was limited to begin with, but it’s long gone now. “Whatever,” I gripe, “this is only *one* of the things I’ve shown you. I was posting again on my forum and—”

“The Nancy Drew gene really runs in your family, huh?” Vrees has a good long laugh at that.

My fists ball tight at my sides. “My mother isn’t just some amateur detective, okay? She’s a journalist. *Was* a journalist. Had a whole degree before she moved here and became a school counselor—I don’t have to explain this shit to you. It’s none of your business.”

Vrees’s scowl disappears under his mustache. “I don’t care what you or TrueCrimeLover420 has to say, Wil. We’ve been through this a million times before. Case closed.”

“Yes, we have, and each and every time, you never stop to actually listen to me.” I go to snatch my photo back, but Vrees is quicker. He yanks it out of reach and rips my work apart with heartless efficiency.

“What the hell?”

His skin ripples with frustration. “I sympathize with you—believe me, kid, I do—but your mom’s case is as good as closed. She skipped town. You and your dad don’t deserve that, but life’s like that.” He sips on

the coffee like we're talking about the weather, not his own ineptitude and my missing mother. "Now it's time to stop playing Sherlock and leave the Clarke family alone. They're good people. Served this town well."

I'd hardly call them good people. Mom hadn't been missing for more than two days when Mrs. Clarke knocked on our door. "I'm so sorry to hear about your mother, Wilhelmina," she'd crooned, so sickly sweet, it could rot my teeth out. Her eyes were splotches of spilled ink and her smile was full of brilliant white teeth. "Send my regards to your father. Our whole congregation is praying they find her soon." And when she'd reached out to hold my hand, I could've sworn my mother's bracelet jangled from her wrist.

Vrees pinches the bridge of his nose. "For as much as you've been harassing them, they should be the ones filing a complaint. Instead, they're helping free your dad from that money-pit motel."

"Money-pit motel" being code for our family home and the only piece of my mother I have left. "Free my dad" meaning steal the place out from under us and flatten it into a parking lot. Anything to run us out of town. Vrees isn't the only one sick of me at this point. I'll never forget the way Mr. Clarke had stiffened when I'd shouted down the street at his back. The hellfire in his eyes when he turned to face me. "*Watch yourself, Miss Greene.*"

There's only so many times you can poke a bear before it finally shows its teeth. But I won't let anyone scare me off. I've got teeth of my own.

My fist slams hard enough on the desk to send every head flying up. "And I've told you a million times too. I'm never giving up on her. Unlike you, I actually care."

"Go home, Wil," he orders.

I huff and shove my phone deep in my pocket before Vrees can confiscate that, too. With a dozen eyes searing into my skin, I storm my way toward the frozen hellscape outside.

“And, Greene,” he calls, his voice more grating than usual. “Consider this a warning. Next time I see you bothering anyone in this town, there will be hell to pay.”

I freeze with my back to him. My fists clench the handle and I fear any more pressure will have it ripping right off. Beyond the window, the snow has made the evergreens in the forest twice as vibrant. Just like how your eyes get brighter after you cry. Not in spite of the pain but because of it. I swallow back tears. “Don’t worry; I’ll do this on my own from now on.” The door slams hard behind me.

Naturally, my bike is buried beneath a mound of snow in the parking lot. It takes several minutes of yanking it free before I’m able to mount the slippery seat, but then, with a shaky start, I’m off.

The roads aren’t quite treacherous at this hour, but riding in this weather is hardly pleasant.

The storm has bleached the blue right out of the sky. Pine Point is always dreary, but the lack of color makes it worse. It is a ghoulish sort of gray, dismal and infectious; it soaks into my skin, magnifying my bad day until it feels like the entire world has been thrown off center. Like I might never be happy again.

Get your shit together.

I pedal faster on my bike. I should be going home—warming myself up before my nightly stakeout in front of the Clarke house—but home is the last place I want to be right now. So instead, I veer toward one of the only people in this town I still care about. Ronnie Clearwater is in the middle of her shift at Earl’s Diner. I might’ve been fired from the same

place, but Earl has yet to outright ban me, so I loiter there on the regular.

It serves as a neon-red beacon in the distance, EARL'S PASTIES shearing through the soupy stretch of white. I have to hand it to Earl. The rest of his food might be school-cafeteria grade at best, but his signature meat pies are surprisingly good.

The diner is small and severely outdated, but it's got a roof and a heater, so it's fine with me.

It's also got a million of those little scented pine tree air fresheners in the window, so that's an added perk. The real pine trees outside aren't quite as fragrant.

Even in December, the Morguewood forest reeks to high heaven. The stench of decay wafts from the forest's soil, tickling my nose. The nasty, lingering odor lasts all year. The first frost subdues it, but it still looms like bile caught in the back of my throat.

Creatures die in droves out there. Deer stiff with frost. Bears with their eyes trained upward, past the starving flies and swirling maggots, up to the grimy gray sky above. Winter keeps their bodies fresh, and their carcasses thaw in the spring, decomposing with the wet slide of summer.

I rip myself away as I reach Earl's.

I swing the door open after kicking my bike to the curb. I don't bother locking it up. It's a rusted, ancient thing that no one in their right mind would steal. If someone needs it that badly, they're in worse shape than me.

It's important to mention that Earl's isn't one of those cute small-town, fifties-style diners.

There are no trendy black-and-white-tile floors or glossy red chairs, no teens sipping milkshakes at the counter while someone punches in an Elvis song at the jukebox.

Instead, we've got ugly-as-sin wood paneling and an overwhelming

number of deer heads and taxidermy fish on the wall staring at you while you eat. A local station plays from the radio. Some twangy country song about a wife who wants to commit a felony on her husband.

I shake the snow off on the grimy mat and step into the sickly white glow of the fluorescents.

There are generations of dead flies trapped in them, and when the lights crackle, it sounds like pattering wings. Typically, this would be the point where I'd slump into one of the worse-for-wear booths and smear the last guy's crumbs off the table. Ronnie would hand me a leftover basket of greasy fries, and we'd gossip back and forth until her shift ends.

Not today. She's busy being held hostage at someone else's table. From the tremble of her fists and the grit of her teeth, I can tell she'd rather run a mile in the cold than talk to this booth right now.

I know who it is before I even look. Ronnie's ex, Lucas Vandenhylde.

There are less than a hundred students in the entire Pine Point school district, but Lucas Vandenhylde has made it his mission to be the most annoying one. He's a walking, talking migraine. Five seconds with him and I need an Excedrin.

Everything about him is too manufactured. Too put in place. His straight white teeth are the product of years of orthodontic work and every word out of his mouth feels like it's been fed to him by a corny eighties high school flick.

"Vee, I only want to talk."

"There's nothing to talk about," Ronnie snips, and I'm proud of her for it. She's taken notes from my daily "How to Be a Bitch" TED Talk.

"Please—"

"Fine, fine. You want to talk?" Ronnie echoes, her voice lowering into a sharp whisper-growl. Not much of a whisper, since I can hear it from across the restaurant. "Okay, let's talk. Let's start with how you've

been flirting with Leah Westbrooke all semester. Is that why you're here now? Because she's got a boyfriend? You're wasting your time crawling back to me."

I know she's seething, because she's got a strand of her hair curled around her finger. Some people twirl it like that to flirt, but it's Ronnie's alternative to yanking her hair right out of her scalp. I scowl at its color. Her harpy of a mother was quick to cover the blue. In less than forty-eight hours, she's already driven her daughter an hour away to a salon to fix it. It's no longer virgin blond but a brassy imitation of it.

Lucas's cheeks burn scarlet. "Flirting? She's my lab partner, Vee. What was I supposed to do? Not talk to her on the off chance you decided to stop hating me and make up?"

Lucas's friend Kevin Garcia sits in the middle of their fight like a skittish referee. He looks so thoroughly out of place in their argument that it's almost funny. He's Waldo hidden in the middle of a battlefield, giving a little smile while surrounded by fallen soldiers. Except Kevin's not the red-and-white-striped-T-shirt kind of guy. He's a walking advertisement for the weird and unexplained.

Today he's wearing an extraterrestrial-themed Christmas sweater, I WANT TO BELIEVE (IN SANTA) scrawled on the front, with a UFO led by reindeer. He's "Jack and the Beanstalk" tall, with black hair cropped close to his warm brown skin. He's one of those guys that would have girls lining up for him if he wasn't so obsessed with Bigfoot.

Kevin catches me looking over and gives me a sheepish half smile. We're not friends, but I guess it's one of those "Congrats, you're the only one who found me on this page!" sort of things. I don't return it.

His smile drops and he occupies himself with the syrup container beside him.

Ronnie whips away from Lucas. "Last I checked, making out with

your lab partner wasn't on the syllabus . . . and for the love of God, I keep telling you to stop calling me that."

Lucas's earlier bravado is gone completely. He sucks in a sharp breath and guards his heart with two tightly crossed arms. "We were broken up . . . Ronnie. It was one stupid time and it meant nothing and we never—we didn't—it wasn't like that. It was a mistake, and it ended as soon as it began. Please, can we not do this here?" He waves his hand around like *here* speaks for itself.

Ronnie's having none of it.

"If you're not going to order," she snaps, "then leave."

Lucas tuts. "Give me a Sprite, then, and Kevin will have a . . ." He looks over to Kevin and Kevin lurches in his skin. He pushes the syrup dispenser away like he wasn't just playing with it.

"Dr Pepper," Kevin answers. "Please."

Ronnie sneers. "Two lukewarm waters coming right up."

She spins on her heels, but Lucas's hand lurches out to capture her wrist. Kevin sneaks a pleading look my way again, and he gingerly tries to remove Lucas's arm.

No luck.

"Veronica, you know I don't like her, right? It's always been you. I didn't come to fight. I was thinking . . . maybe . . . Well, my dad's in Iron Mountain at the moment, so I'm having a bit of a get-together at my place. I was hoping you'd come and we could talk about us and—"

That does it.

My fury propels me toward them in seconds, and I don't miss Kevin's sigh of relief. He won't be relieved with what comes next.

"Didn't you hear her?" I snarl, slapping his arm back toward the floor. "She doesn't want to talk to you."

"Where the hell did you even come from?" Lucas massages his

temples as though I'm the one giving *him* a headache. "This has nothing to do with you, Wil. Butt out."

"If it's about my best friend; it has everything to do with me." I'm sure I look like one of those dogs with the foaming mouths, peering at him from behind a flimsy fence. My smile is nothing more than clenched teeth and unblinking eyes. A face that says, "Try me; I dare you." My finger juts toward the door and I point a path from here to the parking lot. "Walk away right now."

If someone told me a year ago that I would be standing here defending Veronica Clearwater, I would've thought they were on something. But that was BMD—Before Mom Disappeared. Back when we both still lived in separate worlds and Mom was the glue keeping the universe tethered together. It was back when Ronnie wasn't a social pariah like me but genuinely popular—ponytail bobbing behind her head, soft gold shimmer swept across her lids. When she spent every second slung around Lucas's arm, giggling when he pressed kisses into her cheek.

But neither of us are the same person we were junior year. Fate had Ronnie and I slumping into the bleachers at the same time, worn out and ruddy-eyed and alone. We'd talked about everything and anything. The carton of milk she'd dumped on her stupid ex's head. Elwood's stone-faced silence as he ran away. The night my mother went missing and the night her father took one too many pills. He had slipped into the night with a single note scrawled beside him: *We can't keep doing this*. She'd cried on my shoulder and I'd cried on hers and that one afternoon changed everything.

I'd rubbed off on her like a bad case of poison ivy and she'd kept me from spiraling to the point of no return—and if you asked me now, I'd say I'd do anything for her.

Lucas's cheeks burn scarlet, his teeth grinding together like flint

sparking a fire. His eyes whip from mine to hers. “You know she’ll turn on you, too, Vee,” he spits, “just like she did with Elwood. She doesn’t know how to trust people.”

Elwood Clarke. The name stokes a flame inside me, rekindling something that never quite died in the first place. He used to sit by my side, his eyes lighting over the tiniest of things, always rambling incessantly about his butterfly collection. We made sense hanging out together. I was the girl that was quick to bite someone’s head off and he was the skittish boy who needed me to. Best friends until suddenly we weren’t. Before everything in my life went to hell in his family’s handbasket.

Now when I think of him, it’s like swallowing a lit match. The longer I dwell on what we were, the bigger the hole burns inside me.

Lucas’s hands clench at his sides and I know he’s on the verge of saying something particularly nasty when he stands. He doesn’t disappoint: “Elwood was a mess after you. You know that, right? You ruined a lifelong friendship and you didn’t even care. So, what, Wil, did you get tired of ruining your own relationships after your mom left? You had to go and ruin other people’s too?”

He’s taller than me, but it doesn’t stop me from getting close. “Anything else you want to say? You don’t know shit, Lucas. You don’t have a clue what I’ve been through.”

He didn’t spend days sprawled beside Mom on the couch, her nimble fingers twisting intricate braids. He didn’t shadow her every summer in the garden with a wicker basket, dutifully collecting fresh herbs and listening to her prattle on about each one. He didn’t cry so hard, he threw up when days turned to weeks turned to months of his mother never, ever coming home.

I grind my teeth and hold my ground. Keep talking, Lucas. See what happens. “Wil!”

We've gained an audience, but I'm fine with it. The locals have pulled away from their greasy plates, their eyes shifting from the box TV on the wall to the two high schoolers in the far left booth. WWE has nothing on me.

Lucas breathes in one long, shaky breath through his nose and then out his mouth. "Your mom skipping town on you was some messed-up shit, but, c'mon. You use it as a free hall pass to be an asshole. You need to know your place. You walk around this world like you own it."

Anger twists my ribs into tightly wound knots. I go for the throat. "Then do it. Put me in my place."

My world drips red.

CHAPTER TWO

ELWOOD

I've spent the last sixty minutes praying for a heart attack.

Or a stroke. Or an aneurysm. I'm not picky. All God needs to do is strike me down before my father drags me to the pulpit. The idea of standing in front of anyone—a congregation, a classroom, the mirror, some days—gives me heart palpitations.

But it's official: God's not listening.

"Elwood, won't you come here for a moment?" my father asks, a rare slash of a smile on his face as he beckons me to stand in front of an unblinking crowd. I try to remember how to breathe again, but my lungs have thrown out the owner's manual and left me gasping.

"Don't make him repeat himself," Mom snarls too low for others to hear. I know better than to go against her. Her threats have a way of tallying into scars. She reminds me of a spicebush swallowtail, wings as black as a blooming bruise, edges sharp like a mirror shattered by the weight of a fist.

I grip the back of a pew to steady myself. I've not only forgotten how to breathe; I've forgotten how to walk. It should be easy, but now it feels like flying with tattered wings.

Nothing will pacify her until I'm up on that stage. "*Go.*"

And so I do.

The church scrutinizes my every creaking step and tries to fit me into the same cookie-cutter mold as my father—but they fail, no doubt, when they see the two of us side by side. My father, the "Right Hand of God"

for seventeen years. Me, the boy who doesn't know what to do with his own hands. Behind my back? Wrung out in front of me? Definitely, a hundred percent, not in my pockets.

"Elwood's big day is coming soon," Father says with a pride I desperately hope is real. I resist the urge to smile. I must look solemn, serious, ready. My father isn't a butterfly. He's a praying mantis. If I'm not careful, I might lose my head.

He clamps a frigid hand on my shoulder and I risk a tiny look his way. From a distance, there are some undeniable similarities between us. I've grown in his image—wild, woodsy hair; eyes more golden than green, amber spilling in the center. Identical right down to the moles marring our skin. But despite it all, we're not the same. He's taller, broader, his personality a knife wrench to the gut. He twists my features in strange ways, making my eyes too harsh, my lips too cruel.

I've always pictured God with his face.

"Soon he will come of age and abandon his worldly studies for a more important mission." He's talking about my eighteenth birthday. The day I graduate early and life as I know it uproots.

I'm not sure where my parents are shipping me away to, but I know what awaits me: intense scripture study, prayers, and painful devotion. I'm to follow in my father's footsteps no matter how large they may be. Maybe when I return, I can finally fill them.

Devotees lift their hands to that, their fingers reaching toward the heavens. There are so many familiar faces in the crowd, people who've spent their whole lives watching mine. They were there when I was born and they'll be here when I come back. Mrs. Wallace, an older woman who has been our school receptionist since the dawn of time; one of the PTO

moms, Mrs. Clearwater, who stares at me some days like I'm a specimen under glass; Prudence Vrees, the sheriff's wife, always cradling her blossoming stomach, so large now, she might easily topple over.

The church is the only family I have.

"Our final lesson today revolves around change and the necessary transformations we go through under God's will." Satisfied that everyone has properly acknowledged my fate, my father shifts focus. He splays his hands against the pulpit, and for a fleeting moment, beside him, I spy the key swinging from my father's throat.

I've seen him open the tabernacle door with it a million times, watched each and every twist of the lock. As a child, I used to think he kept his heart locked alongside the chalice. But I've looked within and while there's a torn page squirreled inside and perhaps an old cobweb in the corner, there's no softer part of him he's kept hidden away.

Before Father can catch me staring at the lock, I avert my eyes and gaze beyond the pews. I study the ceiling, my tongue tripping over the Latin as I hum the words to myself.

CRESCIMUS IN HORTO DEI, the script reads. We grow in God's garden. It's a fitting quote for our church's name. It's carved on a wooden slab beyond the doors: THE GARDEN OF ADAM. It's nothing commercially produced, no clean lines for your finger to follow. One of our ancestors had whittled the letters freehand with the edge of a knife and the sign has sat there in front ever since.

When my father turns, his eyes swarm across my skin like flies to fresh roadkill. "Elwood, if you will." With a pointed glance, he beckons for me to retrieve the cage in the corner.

I respond with a shaky nod, and it takes the rest of my body a second longer to catch up. I know exactly where the creature is—Father made me catch it, trap it, sit with it in the back seat the entire ride here. My heart

is alive in my chest, no longer trapped within a cocoon but ready to fly away from all the guilt. The creature trusted me. It trusts me now. *Run*, I'd begged. *Run far from here*. It hadn't.

The rabbit shivers inside its cage. It's plump and white like a mound of ice. Silent, save for the occasional twitch. I try not to think about what will happen to it later tonight after the service. It never gets easier to watch. The plunge of the blade spewing through its throat, the blood dripping from the branches. My father's merciless with a knife. *Men have offered sacrifices to the Lord since the dawn of time, Elwood. Who are we to go against His word?* I dread the day my father passes the knife to me. I know I'll hesitate. *Man disobeyed God in the very beginning, son, and we are here to atone for that sin. You are here to atone.*

For now, though, the rabbit will serve as a lesson.

"God gave you ribs for a reason, Elwood," my father scolds quietly when I return. I don't need a mirror to know my lower lip is trembling. "Don't wear your heart so openly on your sleeve." I hope while he's at it, he can't read the rest of the lies off my face. He's always been good at picking my brain and locating the most treacherous parts.

If he figures out what I have planned for tonight, he might swap me for the rabbit. With one last pointed look in my direction, he lifts the caged creature onto the pulpit. "What beautiful white fur, unblemished as fresh snow. If we released it outside now, it would blend in easily." He snaps his fingers for emphasis and the noise spooks it. "But that's only because of its winter coat. If it hadn't changed color with the seasons, we probably wouldn't have it here with us. Some larger creature would've snapped it up as prey. Thanks to the Lord, of course, it's got a working advantage. The world changes and we change with it."

The church's silence opens the door for the world outside. Wind howls through the pine and dead branches scrape the glass. Soon the

moon will swallow the sun whole. What's left of it spills like yolk over the trees and dies on the horizon.

"Church, you might think you have nothing in common with this rabbit. There are no predators to hide from, your hair doesn't change through the year—well, ignoring the occasional gray hair." That earns a slight chuckle from the crowd, enough to cut through any of the tension. He never jokes like that at home. He saves his smiles for an audience. "But I'm here to tell you today that's simply not true. We are precisely like this rabbit in God's eyes. When we encounter obstacles and opportunities in life, we cannot always face them as we are currently. We must ask the Lord to change us—whether we need to become stronger in the face of adversity or we need to summon the courage to follow the path laid out for us. I want transformation to be our theme this Christmas. Stasis is death."

His words have talons, clutching and digging into my already-tender flesh. "If we do not change to adapt to God's plans, we are no better than a brown hare in the snow, waiting for Satan or a hawk to swoop down and grab us."

His lesson is accompanied by a harsh gust of snow. Like my father's lesson, the storm is changing too. It's becoming something impossible to outrun.

It will do more than bury the cars in the lot. It will smother our homes, our stores, the school . . .

School.

The word rolls into my mind unprompted, punching deep in my chest and leaving me winded. I try to shake it off, but I can't. All of it, gone. The old, creaky desks, the ivy slithering up the alabaster sides. And, of course, I think of my only two friends.

Living things have always been so difficult. I remember all the times

butterflies fluttered away from me, never to be seen again. The dead ones didn't. They let me pin them in place, safe behind glass. Beautiful and mine. No work needed.

People aren't like that. They're more like flowers. If you don't tend to them, they'll shrivel and die and leave you with nothing in the end. When I leave, how long will it take for them to forget me?

"Think of it as a going-away party." That's what my friend Lucas said in the hall today, the start of my moral unraveling. I'd been resolved to my fate until those seven words slithered into my ears. "Please tell me you'll go. It might be the last time we see you for years."

I shot him down instantly. "Hell would have to freeze over before my parents agreed to that." But he was just as fast. "Then don't tell them."

"That's a . . ." I didn't finish, and it turned out I didn't need to. My face gave me away.

Lucas filled in the gaps: "Sin, yeah, we know the drill. C'mon, live a little before you go away, Elwood. You really want to go your whole life without ever having fun? Give yourself one night."

"One night," I'd parroted.

"That's all we're asking for, buddy. You can pray about it after. You'll be there and back before anyone notices. What do you say?"

I know what the wind says now. It screams beyond the stained glass. *Sinner, sinner, sinner.*

I shouldn't have entertained Lucas's plan or told him that I'd go if he parked the car far into the trees. One last taste of the outside world—that's how I'd rationalized it to myself. Now I'm wondering if I should've changed like the hare. If clinging to the past really will be the death of me after all.

"A prayer for Elwood's big day," my father finishes, and his palms lift skyward. "That he may continue to change as God commands him to."

The church bows their heads on cue. Their eyes might be closed, but mine are locked on the rabbit's. Its eyes are glossy, black, and unyielding.

"We bring Elwood before you, O Lord, as a testament of our eternal devotion. We ask for his strength and for his transformation. Let him reach manhood in accordance with your word and inherit the heritage he was born to receive. For with life there is death, but with sacrifice, there is eternity." My father's eyes reopen as he calls to the church. "We are seeds in the wind."

That always marks the end of our prayer, a final tribute to the forest around us before we begin the sacrament. Every seed planted in this forest is blessed. Our trees stand like saints, our livelihood, our *Eden*. We whisper our thanks to them when we drive past, when we link hands for dinner, when we gather in church. Father worships each trunk before he cleaves his axe through it.

"And we shall grow in His image," the church returns dutifully, and the sound builds with every voice.

"Amen."

My stomach burns from the sins I've yet to commit.

CHAPTER THREE

WIL

By the way Lucas's cousin is looking at me, you'd think I was a convicted felon. Admittedly, I'm not a saint. Mother Teresa might not be known for shoving people in greasy diners, but I'm certain she would've given me a pass if she'd been there. I'm only standing here now because as much as I hate Vrees, he had the "stalking" part right.

My typical Friday night involves a stakeout in the bushes in front of the Clarke house.

Usually, if I'm lucky, I'll catch a glimpse of Mrs. Clarke fussing with her blinds or Mr. Clarke loudly rehearsing his sermon—or sacrificing rabbits randomly in the snow that one time—but tonight was different. Not once have I seen Elwood—perfect, rule-abiding Elwood—sneak out. Yet here he was acting like a normal human teenager and jumping out his bedroom window. To local law enforcement and God, I'm willing to bet my spying was both a state crime and mortal sin, but I don't care. Sober Elwood might keep his family's secrets under lock and key, but a tipsy tongue will tell me everything I need to know. So to Lucas's party we go.

Still. I could do without Harvey Vandenhylde's stink eye. "You act like I killed Lucas. I lightly tapped him before it got broken up. See? Like this." I demonstrate by giving his flannel chest a shove. I don't think he owns a shirt that *isn't* flannel. His uniform is a long-sleeved shirt tucked into an oversize belt, dark cowboy boots despite the fact we live in northern Michigan, and blond hair hidden beneath a John Deere trucker hat.

He must have lead inserts in his shoes, too, because he doesn't so much as flinch.

"No one wants you here, Wil," he spits, holding his ground. Each word sprays on my cheek, and I make a show of hastily smearing it away.

Damn him and his cowboy boots.

I sneer at Lucas's invite-only house. It's big—not *mansion* big and not even "*my dad works in middle management*" big, but bigger than most of the trailers around here. We're not exactly Silicon Valley.

It's big enough for two more people, certainly. Golden light streams through the windows, bright enough to make up for the pitch-black sky. Silhouettes of gyrating bodies are illuminated on the other side of the glass, people dancing and spinning and laughing.

"Does Lucas pay you to bounce for him or do you do it for free?" I gripe. If Harvey doesn't let us in, breaking into the house is plan B and another chip on my unethical bingo card. Not sure if Ronnie will tag along for that, so I plan out a solo mission in my head. Would anyone even hear shattering glass?

Whatever song they're playing is lost out here, but the ground pulses with the bones of it. Surely that would drown out—

"For the love of God, Wil, why are you still standing here? Go be weird somewhere else."

Before I can mindlessly spout any obscenities and make our situation worse, Ronnie steps out from behind me and decides to save the day with the feminine wiles I clearly don't possess.

Harvey drinks in the sight of her shamelessly. As much as I want to slap him for it, I can see why. She might've rushed every part of this look in her mom's car after I called with an emergency party plan, but she looks good. With fishnet sleeves and a bodycon dress, nothing about her

screams *I'm borrowing the car to study algebra in the library*. I think if her religious mother saw her, she would keel over on the spot. Ronnie finished her look with dark metallic glitter on her lids and a nearly translucent sheen of blue highlighter swept across her cheekbones.

Meanwhile most of me is covered in crusted dirt. Creeping around in someone's bushes will do that.

"Oh, uh, hey, Vee," Harvey says blankly.

She traces a circle on the cement with the front of her shoe. One idle pattern after the other. "Lucas actually *did* invite me. I said no at the time, but"—she pauses to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear—"the more I thought about it, though, the more I realized I wanted to hear him out."

What Ronnie actually said when I asked her to come was something more along the lines of *You want me to go to that asshole's party? I'd sooner die and go to hell*. Followed by some heavy groveling on my part. With the way she's dressed, though, maybe there's an ounce of truth to her words.

Harvey's having a hard time coming up with something coherent to say. Ronnie speeds the process with a puff of her lip and a genuine shiver.

It works like magic. He steps aside, his meaty hand rubbing sweat from the back of his neck. "Sorry, it's freezing. Go ahead and come in."

Wow.

She shimmies past and before he can fully lift his arm up to bar me, she tacks on a "Where I go, she goes," and that's the end of that.

The warmth hits me first. Body heat has raised the room several degrees and then some. It's more than welcome. I've lost feeling in every part of me.

Once I'm confident my arms haven't succumbed to frostbite, I take the time to assess my surroundings; the decorating style consists almost solely of breakable shit. Very old-lady chic. I'm talking about knickknacks everywhere. Little glass baby cherubs and bizarrely showcased fine china.

Some kid is going to break all of this for the fun of it.

The foyer is already littered with red Solo cups and crushed cans. I'd say this place is going to get trashed, but it's already there.

"Where's Lucas? Does he have this party under control?" Ronnie's words are punctuated by the sound of a bottle breaking against the wall.

"Uh . . . yeah. Don't worry about it." Harvey clears his throat and I get the sense that he's talking more to himself than us. His dad's a former Navy SEAL or something. If he gets caught, he'll probably be sent off to boot camp. His expression shifts and his patchy mustache raises with his grin. Well, it's less of a mustache and more like five stray hairs he refuses to pluck. "Can I get you something to drink? Maybe a little Christmas eggnog to be festive?"

I'm going to barf. "I'll have a beer."

He sneers at me like he forgot I was there already. "Do I look like a bartender, Greene? Go get it yourself." His breath reeks.

I roll my eyes. So much for the party of the century. "Ronnie, you want one?"

"Yeah, get me whatever you're having."

Harvey sidesteps me instantly. "Kidding, kidding." He isn't kidding. "I'll get it."

He squints, rifling around in one of the dozen coolers on the floor. I hear the slosh of half-melted ice and the wet grip of his hand on the can. Harvey pulls back with one for the both of us.

He offers it to me like it's his firstborn son and I'm the devil he was stupid enough to make a deal with.

Ronnie shuts him up before he can say anything else. "I'll see you around, okay?" she lies.

She loops her arm around mine, pulling me out of the kitchen and into the smoke-hazed living room despite Harvey's pathetic mewls for

attention. The music is blurred over the sound of tipsy laughter and shouted conversations. Drunk people only shut up when they're passed out or throwing up.

"You owe me for all of this," she whispers once we're out of earshot. We might be surrounded by people (in a county this small, this has got to be the highlight of the year and that says something), but the music is loud enough to drown us out. "Big-time."

"I am indebted to you forever, my liege," I promise.

Ronnie rolls her eyes and gestures with a nod of her head to the staircase. I take a seat beside her and I'm enormously thankful that no one has sloshed beer on this carpet yet. I highly doubt it will stay that way. The whole place reeks of Budweiser, sweat, and Axe body spray.

"God, everyone and their cousin is here," Ronnie groans. There's a shy edge to her voice; I don't miss the subtle twinge of pink on her cheeks. "Do I look okay? Is this too much?"

Not that long ago Ronnie's perfume of choice was Catholic Guilt. She reeked of it. No wonder her mom despises me. Her daughter, Veronica, is long gone. Ronnie, however, is much more fun.

"Are you kidding? You look amazing!" I flick her shoulder. I pretend I'm injecting her with confidence, a syringe piercing through the vein.

She shimmies a little, my words rolling over her. I hope they hit the mark. "Thanks, Wil. You look great too."

I snort, but it's not worth correcting her. Everything about me is messy. I look worse than I did this morning. Black bags have sprung up beneath my eyes, and you can tell my haircut is the lovechild of a rusty pair of scissors and a two a.m. breakdown. I don't make a habit of looking in the mirror. If it's not my own reflection I see; it's my mother's. All the little imprints she left behind.

Don't think about that.

I busy myself with people-watching. Seeing as how Pine Point has the population of another town's food court, I know everyone here.

Brian Schmidt is laughing about something with his posse. He's as big of a delinquent as I am, but popular. He not-so-casually snakes an arm around his girlfriend, pulling her so close that she's practically sitting in his lap. The two of them are shameless with each other when they're sober. Get a bit of alcohol in their system and they're downright disgusting.

Her shrill laughter nearly shatters my eardrums. "*Stooooop*, Brian!" She's got a voice like a wounded hawk, one that needs to be put out of its misery. Her main claim to popularity is being the loudest one in the room. "You're the worst."

That much is true.

"I think I'd have more fun in an intensive care unit," I growl under my breath.

Ronnie rests her cheek in her palm. "Remind me again, whose idea was this?"

Ugh. Okay. She's got a point. "Mine," I drawl, "but I've got a plan."

She cocks her head. "And what was that plan again? Corner Elwood and badger him for information he may or may not have? You never even told me how you *know* he's here."

I bite my tongue. I really don't think she'd approve of me lurking outside of someone else's house with binoculars. "It's a hunch."

She side-eyes me. "I barely know the guy and my hunch is that this is hardly his scene. I don't think he even knows what alcohol is."

"Speaking of that . . ." I pop open my beer and take a quick gulp for confidence.

Unfortunately—due to my missing mom and all—I've grown quite the tolerance for binge drinking. But I'm not the one here who needs to

get plastered and spill all their dark secrets. “Okay, Ron, let’s go track that loser down.”

I offer her a hand and she clutches it, allowing me to guide her through the human sea that used to be Lucas’s living room. We don’t get very far before the chanting starts. “Drink, drink, drink, drink!”

I look toward Brian Schmidt on instinct. If anyone’s getting wasted for attention, it’s got to be him, right? But when I track down his drunken face, he’s busy sloppily making out with his girlfriend. I wish I could burn that image out of my corneas. I trace the chants to the very corner of the room and find a boy upside down doing a keg stand. His shirt lifts a little and I see the scarred pale skin beneath. I recognize his familiar soft curls, the dark lashes, the little mole resting on his cheek.

“Oh shit, you were right,” Ronnie gasps. “That’s—”

“Yeab.”

Elwood Clarke.

CHAPTER FOUR

ELWOOD

Time twists out of reach, seconds and minutes drifting downstream. My own thoughts are held underwater, drowned by the heavy bass and the veil of gyrating bodies. I'm not sure if I've been standing in the corner for twelve minutes or twelve hours.

I can't believe I'm doing this.

The thought loops in my head, over and over. I heard it first when I was wadding my pillow under my blanket.

Again, when I was fiddling with the latch on the window, desperately trying to gently pry the thing open. Once again when I was darting out into the trees. The car wasn't far from the outskirts of my backyard. Headlights off, nothing but the quiet thrum of the engine.

I can't believe I'm doing this, I'd told them, and they'd laughed.

"Here. Want to try a keg stand?" Lucas breaks away from Kevin and slouches over me.

Lucas is the emperor moth of our group. I've got one pinned above my dresser back home. Its wings are like sunlight melting through the trees. Orange spilling into a woodsy wash of brown. Impressive and confident and totally at odds with me and Kevin. Kevin's an emerald swallowtail. Metallic UFO-green paths streaking across each wing. And then there's me. I'm more like an eastern comma—wings a smoky, burnt brown shriveled like autumn leaves. Something that blends in and hides. Something you miss unless you really stop to look.

Lucas gestures to an enormous-looking barrel on the floor, a funnel,

and a long tube interlocking the two. “If you’re feeling up to it—”

I hate the way his expression peels back when he talks to me. Each time he forgets who I am—treats me like Kevin or anyone else—but then pulls back. Remembers.

“I want to,” I say, even though the guilt has already soured my stomach. All I want is to be tucked back in bed. Warm from the blanket thrown around me, not from the burning flush of my cheeks.

One night before everything changes.

I rip the bottle from his hand. He’s already downed a quarter of it and the glass is still warm from his sweaty palms. There’s a twisting serpent across the label, a scaly print stretching from one end to the next. In my mind I’m wrapped in foliage, teeth grazing against an already bitten apple. This isn’t my first sin of the night, but each one is a shot into the night sky, explosive and heaven bound.

The liquid doesn’t burn this time. It rolls down my throat, bitter. A full-bodied mix with the lingering stench of wheat. I want to spit it out, but I know I can’t, so I drink and drink and drink.

Done.

I shake the bottle for more, but all I get is the rush of my own sticky, hot breath. Trapped air and the hollow ring of an empty bottle.

I drop it. It shatters. I decide then and there that I love the sound of broken things. The thud of something whole, followed by the splintering crack of it breaking into tiny, impossible pieces. Never to be put back together, but it’s okay. Crushed glass looks like stardust.

“You’re really going to drink all that and do the keg?”

I nod. Or I think I do. I don’t know. All I know is I need to wash this out of my system for good. “Is that really Elwood Clarke getting shit-faced?” Brian Schmidt breaks away from his girlfriend’s mouth to sneer my way. He’s less of a butterfly and more of a cockroach. His left hand

combs through his over-yellow bangs. “I thought his wild Friday nights were him reciting Bible verses for fun.”

If he only knew how many lived in my mind. My father made me memorize hundreds, and when my tongue tripped or the words failed me, he’d beat the line into my skin.

My nail carves a crescent into my palm as Brian doubles over in laughter. This will pass soon enough when I’m shipped away. All of it. The stilted day-to-day interactions, the “playful” jabs in my ribs from Brian and his lackeys on my way to class, the constant desire to melt into the floor. My vision blurs and I see Brian molt: hideous expression smeared away, eyes wide and mouth agape, blood dripping, dripping, dripping. The roar of the party fades and my thoughts scream like a biblical swarm of locusts.

Before I can focus, there are arms on my legs. Lifting me up and up until I’m staring down at the floor, suspended in midair over a keg. I hold the tube to my lips.

One gulp. Two. The sound of my name comes from all sides. It doesn’t last—the letters dissolve, reshaping in the air to form something else. They chant the new word again and again and I think they’re telling me to drink so I do and—

“Way to go, Elwood!” It’s Kevin. He’s beaming at me like this was some sort of contest, like I won something. Maybe I did. Maybe my reward is the tipsy sensation prickling beneath my skin, the strange buzz of happiness overtaking my fear.

When they lower me back down, my legs feel like jelly and Brian’s no longer even a speck on my radar.

I laugh. It’s suddenly so easy to laugh. The anchor I’ve been tethered to forever has been torn loose. Bright lights catch on the broken bottle still on the floor, throwing color like a kaleidoscope. That’s what a group

of butterflies are called. A kaleidoscope. I've always loved that.

"Hey, look, she came." Kevin paws at Lucas's shoulder and Lucas's jaw hits the ground. "I didn't think Veronica would show up."

Since I've become so enamored with the glittering glass, I almost forgot where I was. With a bit of effort, I manage to lift my head and look out.

The details drift in and out of clarity. One second they're there; the next they're gone. "You think she's actually going to give me the time of day?"

Kevin shrugs. "She's here, isn't she?"

"God, I'm already sweating. I didn't plan this out. I don't know what to say to her."

Laughter bubbles from my chest for no reason, light and airy and soft. I want to tell him to open his heart, to offer her all the tender truths he's kept buried and make amends. But it's too much work to make my lips cooperate. So instead, I focus on finding Veronica in the crowd.

She's certainly pretty—long lashes, clear eyes, rosy cheeks—but . . . I don't know. My heart is calm. I don't look at her and see days stretched out on the grass; I can't imagine counting the freckles on her skin or picking branches out from her messy, tousled hair.

There's only ever been one girl like that for me.

And the very thought of her now washes over my bones like an arctic tide. There's no warmth left. *Your family knows what happened to my mom. I know they do.* Her teeth scraped over the accusation, her eyes were fire-bright and raging. I'd come that day to console her, but the grief wasn't there. Just rage. *You need to choose right now.* Our friendship hung on a single question: *Who do you believe, your family or me?*

"You should talk to her." At least that's what I try to say. The words are sticky in my mouth. Lucas has gone a peculiar shade of pink. It

stretches from his ears to his nose to his chin. “I’m not sure if I can. God, I’m such a loser. I fucked things up in the diner.”

“Just tell her everything you’ve told us.” I drag him by the sleeve. “That you love her.”

I’m a wingman. If I concentrate really hard, I can even feel the wings ripping out from my back. I’ll fly him over to her. They’ll talk and he’ll apologize and everything will be okay. Maybe I won’t feel so guilty for leaving tonight and never coming back.

“Every time I try to say something to her, it all goes wrong, man. Things go one way in my head and then I see her and I forget how to speak and suddenly I blink and the whole thing’s over and I’m the asshole again.”

I want to argue, but I don’t know what to say. Spinning back, I look for her again, but the crowd’s already begun to disperse. Now that I’m no longer drinking, there’s nothing to watch. Perhaps I should grab the drink from Lucas’s hand again, if only to bring her back over here.

My eyes catch on a familiar face.

There’s nothing soft about this girl. Eyes blacker than dripping ink, her mouth twisted in a permanent sneer. She’s the type of pretty that could get you killed; if you stare too long, you’ll turn to stone. She has dark roots, hair swinging in jagged strands to her shoulders. All thorn, no flower.

I stare at her and her thirty-two freckles. Wilhelmina Greene.

The sight of her throws the world apart. I see her and the butterflies in my chest drop dead.

The surge of happiness I’m feeling—a grin I couldn’t shake, laughter that gushed out of me—ends abruptly.

She stalks my way. Closer and closer until she’s got a fistful of my shirt.

It's been one awful, tense year. A whole year trapped in her vicious storm cloud, caught in a hatred so deep and deadly, it's left me permanently winded. She asked me to choose and I did, and I've been living in the aftermath of my decision ever since.

All the pointed looks she gave me when she thought I wasn't looking, the way her smile would shrivel and die when her eyes met mine.

And now her fingers are locked tight.

"W-Wil." The name goes down hard. I have to swallow twice to force it through my throat. I hyperfixate on every little movement—the slosh of my voice rising like bile in my throat, my knees cracking as I shift in place, the sluggish weight of my body.

And she's pulling me, dragging me forward like I weigh nothing. I feel featherlight.

There are catcalls and jeers from all sides. People are looking, but I can't bring myself to look back. The lights morph: The vivid hues from before have vanished. Now it's a steady flash of deep red. The same harsh hue of a trickling cut or a festering, angry wound.

My chest hurts. Really, really bad. Each breath is a rattling hiss in my lungs. Wil is touching me. I can feel her warmth spreading through my shirt. *Wil is touching me.*

I recognize the back door as it slams behind us. And then there's silence. Me and Wil. Alone. Lucas's backyard stretches in a sheet of never-ending white. She's close. My back is to the wall and her lips are not far from mine. She looks pissed and maybe I should be scared, but she smells like strawberries. I tell her as much.

"That's all you've got to say to me?" she says, breaking the silence with burning eyes and gnashing teeth. "Not 'sorry my family is stealing your home, Wil'? 'Sorry I'm not helping you solve your mother's case,

Wil? . . . Seriously, though, strawberries?” Her anger dips to brief confusion, and she takes a sniff of her own hair. “I smell like BO.”

I think I say something, but I’m not sure. All I know is that as soon as she lets go of me, I’m going to fall. My legs are barely keeping me upright.

“Your father’s done playing preacher, huh? He wants to become God now? What does your family even want with the motel? Let me guess, you’re going to demolish it? Make it into a megachurch?”

The motel?

I blink, but I can’t make her words make sense. My dad’s never mentioned Wil or her family since the accusation and the case. There’s no way he would want to buy anything like that.

“I don’t . . .” I’m not sure what sobers me more: the snarl of the wind or the tightening of my collar beneath her fist. She eases and I gasp for air. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Wil.”

“Liar,” she hisses, and her voice is frigid. She’s as volatile and angry as the last time she accused me. But this time I have nothing to fight back with. This time she’s rendered me speechless. “You’re telling me Sheriff Vrees knows and I know and you don’t?”

I shake my head. It’s all I’m capable of.

“And I suppose there’s nothing you want to tell me about my mother? More specifically, where she is?” *My mind.* That’s what I want to say, but even drunk, I know better. Sophie Greene has taken a permanent residence in my thoughts. She exists in murky shadows, and when she smiles, it’s the same one I saw in church that day. No one new ever came to our service, and yet there she was, taking a seat in the back pew and smiling large as ever despite all the stares.

You know, my father said over dinner when she disappeared, *that*

woman left her newborn daughter before. She ran out on her family and when she came to her senses, she made a whole spectacle of her return. She must've missed the attention. Not everyone shares the same family values we do.

I wonder if she's smiling wherever she is now.

"I told you before"—I fight to keep the words even—"I don't know where your mom is, Wil, but my family has nothing to do with it, okay? What else do I need to do to prove that? I don't know how you can even suggest it in the first place. They're the ones who organized the search, they're the ones who hung up all the 'Missing' flyers, they—"

"Oh, they're such saints, excuse me. It takes a real saint to abuse your child, doesn't it?" Even she seems stunned by the words. She gnaws on her lip and I wonder if she's afraid of anything else toppling out and spoiling in the air between us. "I shouldn't have said that."

"You don't know anything, Wil." I twist away from her prying eyes. I can't believe the words that come out of my mouth next. I guess that's a common theme between us tonight. "Is abandoning your own daughter any better?"

She holds her glare a while longer before breaking away with a hiss. "Fuck you, Elwood."

I was right—she lets go of me and I collapse to the frozen pavement. The patio door rattles behind her. I'm not sure how long it takes for me to find my footing. I wobble on my feet, a growing sickness climbing its way up. The world outside is freezing, but my skin burns still from her touch.

I feel sick.

It's already become far too hot to breathe. I feel like I'm about to purge.

I take the stairs two at a time.

Upstairs, the walls are lined with smiling faces. Grins that grow wider

the longer I look at them, eyes that become more pupil than white. My skin feels like it's going to ooze off my bones like paint.

I need to find the bathroom.

I swing open the doors, one by one. The knobs twist open easily enough as I look for an escape. An empty office with sterile, crisp walls. A storage closet where everything is tucked away neatly in compartmentalized boxes. The third door swings back to reveal the moon. Silver streaming in, casting down on a bare back. Spine curving like the bones in the woods; wounded, guttural cries; bodies bathed in blue.

Harvey and some girl, making out on the bed.

The image of them washes away. Just two creatures, arms and legs and limbs. Blood and bone and the flesh sealing over them both. Pounding hearts, the heavy drumbeat of youth. "What the fuck, get out of here!" she screams at me, chucking a pillow toward my chest. I scramble over myself. The door slams shut beneath me, my legs carrying me away. I run fast down the hall. The nausea grows stronger with each passing second. I creak open the last door, audibly sighing at the sight. I'm at the toilet in seconds. The burn of bile rises in my chest, clawing up to my mouth, leaving a bloody mess of my throat. I heave and heave and heave. My eyes sting, already welling with tears. It's disgusting, all of it. The taste of it, the sound of it, the fact that my hands are gripping a grimy toilet seat for dear life. People have sat on this. They have done more than sit on it. God, god, god. I need to disinfect my hands five times over. I need to bleach them. My mother can't know about this. My father can't know about this. No one can—

I throw up again.

Sinner, sinner, sinner.

My nails drag down my tongue, clawing away the layer of filth with equally filthy hands. I need to get the taste out before it roots itself inside

me and stays forever. I'll pray and I'll pray until it goes away.

I stare into the bowl.

It's full of snapped twigs and clumps of grass. Pine needles peppered all around, a stark forest of green against the white. In the very center of it all, I see the broken, crumpled body of a moth. Fur as red as dried blood, no longer fresh and vivid and bright. Crescent moons are carved out from its wings, two identical sepia-stained splotches. Eye spots black like marbles, mimicking the hawkish, beady gaze of a predator. It's a Columbia silk moth.

It buzzes in the middle of the water, not quite dead yet, squirming with the last flickering of life.

The flush of the toilet takes it away.

I stagger back to the wall and wonder what it was that I saw. I'm drunk. That's it. I'm just hallucinating because I'm drunk and tomorrow it will all be a bad memory.

Stumbling my way toward the faucet, I let the hot water run between the cracks in my fingers.

"This isn't real. This isn't real. This isn't—This isn't—"

The words clog my throat and block out the air. I gasp, but I can't breathe. *I need to get out of here.* But I don't get far.

Stars burst from the lights until they're all I see. They take the world with them, shattering my vision into a deep, dusky black.

CHAPTER FIVE

WIL

“So, how did that go?” Ronnie asks. I lean into her, not quite trusting my legs to keep me upright. Elwood’s driven a stake through my heart and I’m doing my best not to bleed out on the floor.

Of course he wouldn’t say anything. He doesn’t give a shit about you. He made that clear a year ago.

Months have passed and the past is still festering and raw.

I give Ronnie’s hand a squeeze. The night has taken a toll on her makeup; her eye shadow is starting to crease in the folds, lipstick transferred from her mouth to her cup. Even when she’s messy, she’s beautiful. Her presence helps, but it’s not enough. Nothing is enough.

“I wish you’d talk to me, Wil,” she begs. “Really tell me the truth about things again.” One day she’ll leave me too. Everyone does.

I try to say something, but when I open my mouth, everything comes rushing to the surface.

My nails sink into my arm, deeper, deeper, distracting myself with pain. Pain is better when I’m the one in control.

“Whoa, Wil?” The sound of her voice forces me to look up. She’s standing there, concern etched deeply in her face.

Tears trickle down, seeping into my mouth until all I taste is salt.

“Can we leave? I don’t want everyone to see me like this,” I croak into her ear. My fingers clutch greedy fistfuls of her—her hair, the back of her dress, anything I can do to get closer.

Her thumb swipes my cheek. “This party is boring anyway. Tell you what, let’s head back before the roads go to hell.”

Hell isn’t some burning, fiery pit beneath the earth. Hell is stepping out into the cold and having Mother Nature sucker punch the air out of your lungs. Hell is a scraping wind so intense that you check for blood on your cheek.

Thank God Ronnie dried the tears from my face. I have a horrible feeling they would freeze onto my skin otherwise. On particularly nasty days, I’ve gone outside with damp hair only to end up with hardened clumps of ice.

The car rumbles to life. Windshield wipers scratch against the frozen glass and ice-cold air blows out from the vents, doing very little to fight the chill slithering across my bones.

Embarrassment has already begun to creep in where the grief was. It’s one thing to cry alone—teeth clamped on a pillow, smothering sobs behind paper-thin walls. It’s another thing to cry openly, to let the whole world see how vulnerable you’ve become.

“Here, let’s see how worked up they’re getting over this storm.”

Ronnie presses a gloved finger against one of the radio buttons. All the stations are hours away from us, our own town too small for much of anything. “Huge storm front moving through tonight, folks. I’ve got to tell ya, it’s rough on the map. There’s a squall advisory from one to five a.m.” Our local weatherman’s got the heaviest Yooper accent you’ve ever heard in your life. “Real monster of a storm. We’re getting our first taste of it tonight. Hopefully, all of you listeners are staying safe—”

Meanwhile, Ronnie’s death-gripping the wheel and we’re barely creeping along. There’s bound to be some kid in a ditch soon. Scratch that: there’s bound to be several. By tonight, the winds will be wild, and you won’t be able to see anything in front of you. Just blinding white ev-

erywhere. And tonight is mild compared with what's to come.

We weave our way out of the world's smallest neighborhood and past Earl's—which Ronnie may or may not have a job at anymore because of me.

All the buildings in this town are scattered among the trees like stray billboards on a rural road. Ronnie's car crawls past the only bar we have. Despite the weather, there's still cars parked in the lot. Mill workers treat-drinking at Tail's Tavern like a second job. Thanks to them, the Ramirez family must be rolling in cash; they've certainly got enough to plaster pennies all over the place.

I resist the urge to tell Ronnie to swing over there. They hardly card as it is, and I'd love to scrape some of the coins off their resin floor. Dad's so behind on his bills that I'll take whatever I can get.

"So," Ronnie starts. If the roads weren't trash, she'd probably be drumming her fingers against the wheel like she usually does. Outside, the snow has picked up even harder. It's going to suck to shovel later. With the motel being sold, I'm almost tempted to give up on it completely and let the snow bury us alive.

No.

I'll figure something out. The motel isn't going anywhere.

"So," I parrot, but I stare at the road in favor of making eye contact. Silence.

She makes the mistake of rubbing her eye with one hand and her eyeliner smudges even worse. "Please offer me a sliver of what's going on. I'm begging here."

My mouth's gone dry. The fortress I've built around my secrets is steep, but I force some through the cracks for Ronnie. "They're closing Mom's case. Vrees practically told me that when I came in today. He's done dealing with me."

I see the effect instantly. The awkward ripple beneath her skin. The gears turning rapidly in her brain, trying her best to offer up the right thing to say. I really hope she doesn't tell me she's sorry. I've had my fill of that.

"Seriously?" she asks instead, and I could almost sigh in relief. Her brows furrow, and I watch the curl of her lip as she scowls. It's hard to tell how much is genuine and how much is her mimicking me, serving whatever emotion she thinks I'd like to see. "It's only been a year. And now it's all over? Just like that?"

"For them," I'm quick to chime in. "Not for me."

Ice gusts carry flurries across the half-eaten road. Snow's devoured any lines we had. She wets her lip. The lipstick from earlier is all but eaten away. "I could help."

"Unless you want to hang out in Elwood's bushes with me—" Shit, I didn't mean to say that much.

Her laughter is short-lived. When I don't join in, she whips toward me, and I have to swat at her to keep focused on the road. "*You're serious?*"

"It would be one horrible joke," I counter, and the thought of someone else knowing the truth sours my stomach. "I need dirt on them."

She's never been one to hide her nerves well. "Wil, you could get in actual trouble, you know that, right? What if they send you to juvie or something?"

"Pretty sure they don't send eighteen-year-olds there." I shrug. She doesn't ease up. "I'm not well versed in the law, but . . . God, Wil, now you've got me paranoid about this. Next thing you're going to do is tell me you've actually broken in . . . you haven't, have you?"

I shake away her concern. "No, Ronnie, you can relax. And I'm not really worried about me. I'm worried about Mom. I need proof."

Ronnie twitches her free hand forward, but I yank my own hand back

before she can reach me. I don't need pity. Pity won't pay the bills, and pity sure as hell won't fix things.

She changes the dial on the radio instead. "Did Elwood give you anything?" she asks.

"That's the worst part," I confess, and luckily my hands are out of sight. They've begun to shake a little. I sit on them to fight the tremble in my fingers. "He acted like he didn't have a clue what I was talking about. Again. I guess it doesn't matter if he's drunk or high or on truth serum."

"Do you believe him?"

"No. I should've known better. I don't believe a word out of Elwood's mouth."

We sit in silence for the rest of the drive. It's a full fifteen minutes to the motel from Lucas's place. Typically, it takes half that time, but not before some Good Samaritan decides to plow the roads.

The green from this morning has vanished without a trace. Ice gusts whip past the main entrance, spinning the VACANCY sign in dizzy circles. Any faster and it might fling right off and crash into the parking lot.

Above it: GRE MO EL.

The surviving lights cut through the gray night, a fluorescent lime green that should spell out "Greene Family Motel" but hasn't in a year. Now it's an eyesore, but at least it's hideous enough to match the rest of the building.

"Does it ever get any easier?" I ask. It's a quiet question, barely there in the dark.

I don't have to explain myself. Grief stitches an impenetrable bond between us. "I've missed my dad since I was eight. I think about him all the time, I really do, but . . . time helps. You learn to take the world day by day. You pick up the shattered pieces of yourself and move forward."

I link my pinkie finger with hers and she gives me a reaffirming

squeeze. “Do you need me to spend the night? I can make up some lie in the morning to my mom, but if you need me, I’m here.”

I don’t want to be alone. I really, really don’t. But try as I might, I can’t bring myself to ask.

Not when it’s so easy to fake a smile, give her finger a tighter tug, and say, “Don’t worry, I’m okay.”

She squints. “Are you sure?”

“Positive,” I lie.

She abandons my hand to pull me into an actual half hug. “Text me if you need anything, all right?” She’s a lot stronger than she looks. “Anything you need. I’ll be here. Anarchy Sisters, remember?”

Mrs. Clearwater dubbed us that shortly after she started hanging out with me. After I started “influencing” her to be her own person. It was never meant to be a compliment, but it sounds too cool to be anything but.

“How could I forget?” I grin—a real one this time. “Anarchy Sisters for life. Drive home safe, okay?” I smile until her car fades from view. Then I’m left with my own racing thoughts and what Sheriff Vrees lovingly described as the “money pit.”

From an outside perspective, I definitely see why. The family motel is a portal to the seventies. Everything in this place is determined to stay old. No amount of Febreze chases away the musty scent hanging in the air. Wipe off the furniture all you want, but the dust will always come crawling back.

You can hardly even see us from the main road anymore. With every passing year, the Morguewood creeps closer. Vines tangle up the walls, scratching the sides like it might tear us apart if it tries hard enough.

We didn't always live here. The idea of having an actual home is so long gone, so distant now, that it doesn't even seem real. The memories are there, but they feel transplanted, fed to me. Like a story you heard all the time growing up. You might remember it by heart, but the story itself doesn't belong to you.

The only employee we can afford to keep is nursing a cigarette at the door.

On second thought, I'm not sure if we ever pay her. Dad doesn't pay for a lot of things.

Maybe Cherry's here out of the sheer goodness of her heart. Maybe it's pity. My mother and her were so close, you'd think they were mother and daughter. With my real grandma dead and Cherry's son in jail somewhere, maybe that's what they became to each other. Family.

"Before you ask, no, you can't have one," she says without even looking at me. I'm surprised the strong winds haven't blown her cigarette right out. She protects it with an ungloved hand. Each finger is jammed with rings, and her nails are yellowed where the polish has chipped.

"What makes you think I was going to ask?"

"Because you always ask." There's a faint smile on her lips.

"Touché." I snort.

She may be older than dirt, but she's never got gray hair to show for it. She dyes her locks a fire-engine red, sprucing it up every week. She told me once she swipes the box colors from the corner store by distracting the cashier with a bone-rattling cough and "accidentally" knocking them into her purse. *If I gotta put up with growing old, I need to have some fun every now and again, right?*

At the moment, though, she looks exactly how I feel: frustrated, worn out, and in dire need of a year-long nap. Her signature red lipstick looks like it was reapplied in the dark with her left hand. She's bundled so

tight in a sequined scarf that it makes my own throat itchy.

Her nose scrunches, and I'm sure she can smell the heavy stench of alcohol riding along my breath. "So, what's a girl like you up to on a Friday night?"

I shrug, carrying my eyes over to the sign. The neon lights burn. "Drinking. Partying. Making reckless adolescent decisions."

"All that, huh?" she prods before laughing and taking another puff. I watch the way she holds the smoke inside and shudders with it like a dragon's breath. It reeks.

"Nah, I had one beer and then Ron and I drove home. That was it."

"Shouldn't be drinking."

"You shouldn't be smoking."

She grunts, but I see the hint of a grin. "Touché." One more puff and she's tossing it in the ashtray. "So, your dad finally told you, huh?"

"He didn't tell me shit. I read the paper myself." My body burns at the memory and the anger is almost enough to warm me up.

"Your father isn't the best at handling things, but can you blame him for being nervous?" she asks, her words breaking in a telling smoker's cough. "You're not exactly sunshine and rainbows around him. You're a real spitfire like your mom. Let me guess, you ripped into him for it?"

I avert my eyes. "A bit."

You're selling to the fucking Clarke family? How could you?

What else would you have me do? There's nothing left for us, Will!

I might not be good at much, but I'm great at drawing out rage. For a couple wonderful seconds, he came alive. He was more than a hollow husk of himself. A guy who was a father to me once but nothing to me now.

But then he disappeared again.

I tell her the same thing I told him: "This is all we have left of her."

The look she gives me is nostalgic at best and tragic at worst. Eyes drooping low, lips pressed tight. I dislike pity, but I'll take it any day over the way Dad reacted. His emotions wiped away as easily as they came, soaked up until there was nothing left.

Cherry sighs. "Your mom was never too thrilled about Greene's. Sure she would have sold it, too, for the right price. This place has always been your father's child."

Goes to show how much he cares about his "children." I almost say it, but I bite my tongue. At this point, Dad's the least of my concerns. "I don't care. After this, it's all over. We already lost the house. We've lost so much, Cherry. We can't afford to lose anything else. Besides, what are you going to do?"

She makes a face—hard to say if it's over the smoke riding the air or my sudden interrogation. "I'll manage, kid. I always do, don't I?"

"It's not fair."

"Life's not fair."

I grind my teeth. How many times do I have to hear that from people who've already given up?

"I hate to say it, Wil, but it's too late. I'm not sure how you'd weasel your way out of a contract unless Ezekiel Clarke drops dead or lands himself in jail. And even then, who knows?"

Her voice is distant, foggy, even. "Growing up means learning to roll with the punches."

I refuse to accept that. "Then I'll never grow up because I don't plan on taking this lying down. If they're punching me, then I'm punching back hard."

I clamp down on my lip hard enough to draw blood. Ronnie's words spin in my thoughts. *You haven't broken into their house yet, have you?*

No, but maybe it's time. If Vrees isn't going to help me and I'm not

going to get any answers from Elwood, I'm going to need to double down on my investigation.

"Wil. Promise me you'll leave that family alone." There's a desperate edge in her voice that isn't lost on me. Cherry rarely begs for anything.

"I promise," I lie.

Her eyes rest on me for a moment longer. But then she nods, musters a weak smile, and leaves.

"Dad, I'm heading out. Try not to choke on your own vomit okay?"

I squint to make sure he's only passed out and not actually dead. It can be hard to tell some days.

When Mom first disappeared, there was still a bit of life left in him. He'd comb his hair, trim his beard, make sure he wasn't covered in literal ketchup stains. He even got a second job as a chef in the neighboring town of Hartsgrove.

Those days are gone.

Today, he's whiskey-stained, and his room is a hoarder's paradise. Our old microwave sits unplugged in the middle of the floor; next to it, there are boxes of old plates wrapped in newspaper; a vacuum ironically catches the majority of the dust, sitting neglected in the corner. He hoards all this in hopes we'll move out one day and need it all again.

Without Mom, the two of us alone couldn't afford to pay for the house and the motel, so here we are.

I check the nightstand beside him. There's a whole medicine cabinet's worth of prescriptions—some to make him less depressed and some to make him less of an alcoholic. He's used none of it. His drug of choice is a bottle.

"The things I do for you," I snarl, flipping him to his side. Not like

he hears. He barely hears me when he's awake. "If you need me, I'll be saving the motel. Saving *us*."

I leave him with that, and I let his bedroom door slam shut behind me.

Without Cherry here, the whole motel has grown darker. The place feels especially haunted tonight—there's a quiet sputtering somewhere, a faucet dripping, pipes creaking. Walls grown tired of holding their weight, floors shifting and crying beneath my feet. Shadows find their way in from the outside. Wind slams at the glass doors in violent gusts. The parking lot lights tear through the darkness, but beyond them the world has grown pitch-black. Snow blows in from the left, ripping out from the sky in sideways gusts.

With an aggressive storm like the one outside, I should be happy I'm in here. Cozy and safe with a roof above my head and the blankets raised to my chin . . . but my mind is set. Whether she wanted to give me the idea or not, Ronnie was right. I'm done camping out in the bushes and waiting for something to happen from the outside. I need to find out what goes on inside their carefully held walls.

I only barely remember to layer up before I charge out.

The doors scream their complaints, swinging open to reveal the snow-drenched forest, newly barren branches, the moon held captive between the clouds.

Winter is unnerving in its silence. There's nothing but the snap of my feet and the cloud of my breath and the warning whistle of the wind. It tugs at my chin, inviting my eyes toward the tree line.

Tendrils jut out onto the road, inching out from the forest, breaking only to claim new land.

I stand on shaky legs, my eyes drifting back and forth between the peeling doors and the white-capped forest. I've cleared a decent path, but

I can't go back yet. I wince against the onslaught of snow, doing my best to look out even when the flurries get into my eyes. The quickest way to get to their home is through the trees. There should be a path by now, but it's obscured by mounds of fresh snow. I've walked this route many times before, my eyes shot from tears and my blood coursing like acid in my veins.

I'm getting answers today one way or another. *Ready or not, Clarkes, here I come.*