

THREADS: A NOVEL

by

Alyson Mary Jordan

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in
English

Charlotte

2024

Approved by:

Professor Bryn Chancellor

Dr. Lara Vetter

Professor Allison Hutchcraft

ABSTRACT

ALYSON MARY JORDAN. *Threads: A Novel*.
(Under the direction of PROFESSOR BRYN CHANCELLOR)

In the tired and sleepy town of Tilly, North Carolina, fourteen-year-old Claire Plyler has met her edge. In the years since the Great Depression first hit, her tally of losses has grown to encompass her father who left to find work never to return, her mother, embittered by grit and grief, and her showboat brother James who vanished one night in search of a life worthy of being written. One morning when a strange and suspicious boy appears to her at sunrise on her favorite hill, Claire risks trusting him if only to break her cycle of standing still.

Meanwhile, Eli Dolen has never stopped moving, nor can he afford to. A petty thief and novice time-traveler, Eli wakes up in 2010 Charleston, South Carolina, twelve years before his home time, with little means of reaching his intended destination. Stranded, Eli's desperation mounts with each second he spends trying to recover his loved ones, scattered across time by his mistake.

As Eli and Claire's threads of loss and longing grow increasingly tangled, their stories become inextricable, begging the question if any of us is ever really alone.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis would not exist without Professor Bryn Chancellor. Firstly, because without her I would not be a writer and secondly because her patience, grace, wit, and invaluable feedback have been the driving forces behind every draft. To her, I am immeasurably grateful. I am further indebted to Dr. Lara Vetter and Professor Allison Hutchcraft for serving on my thesis committee and for offering encouragement and guidance during this project and throughout my graduate career. Thank you to Dr. Kirk Melnikoff for his steadfast belief and to Dr. Daniel Shealy for counting on me to push myself. Research for this thesis was supported financially by the Ruff Graduate Research Scholarship, for which I am very appreciative. Thank you to Emma Lynch, River Craig, Angela Nelson, Catherine Sawyers, and Caitlyn Ross for their friendship and for treating this story with the care and attention they would their own work. Thank you to Carlos Serrano, Britt Olson, Alex Simmons, and Anna Graham for holding me up and leading me through, each in their own way. Last, but certainly not least, thank you to my family for loving me always. Without them, I would be lost.

DEDICATION

To all those I love -

I would chase down every Thread.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION	vii
BIBLIOGRAPHY	xv
CHAPTER 1	1
CHAPTER 2	14
CHAPTER 3	19
CHAPTER 4	26
CHAPTER 5	32
CHAPTER 6	41
CHAPTER 7	50
CHAPTER 8	56
CHAPTER 9	64
CHAPTER 10	70

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

In her book *Madness, Rack, and Honey*, the poet Mary Ruefle writes about beginnings. She references Paul Valéry, who describes how the opening line of a poem “is like finding a fruit on the ground, a piece of fruit you have never seen before, and the poet’s task is to create the tree from which such a fruit would fall” (Ruefle 1-2). Further, Ruefle writes, “if you have an idea for a poem, an exact grid of intent, you are on the wrong path, a dead-end alley, at the top of a cliff you haven’t even climbed” (3). In Ruefle’s writing, and in Paul Valéry’s metaphor, I see the genesis of my thesis. One day as I sat at my notebook, I stumbled upon a new and intriguing piece of fruit: a girl in a tree, looking out at the sunrise, waiting. I did not know then what she was waiting for, but I sensed her wait had been long and that whatever, whomever, she yearned for would be worth it.

From this fruit grew the initial chapters of *Threads*, a novel which centers around fourteen-year-old Claire Plyler who lives in the North Carolina town of Tilly during the Great Depression. Wistfully imagined, this work sits with the realities of the Great Depression while also leaping forward to modern day. This leap occurs by way of Eli Dolen, a young man on a desperate quest to recover the two people he loves most from the complex web of time. Incorporating elements of magical realism through time travel, this novel tracks Claire and Eli as they explore the shape of loss and chase after the people they call home. As Claire and Eli’s stories unravel and intertwine, the question of whether past, present, and future can be so firmly split becomes increasingly difficult to answer.

All of this I know now, but as I approached the writing of this novel, I embraced spontaneity. While I pursued the girl in the tree during Dr. Gargano’s Writing Young Adult Fantasy course, I left many facets of Claire and Eli up to the characters themselves. Never one to

plot, especially in the contemporary short fiction I had written until this point, I strove to allow the story to evolve organically. This process often cast me, a first-time novelist, into the role of a backseat driver, one who's lost her GPS and is hopelessly lost, grappling with the map on the dash while tenuously steering the wheel with her knees. Fortunately, Claire and Eli regularly appeared with road signs eager to show me the way.

As I consider multi-faceted, firmly grounded characterization to be the driving force of compelling fiction, I focused considerably on acclimating myself to *Threads*' main characters. Claire's family is one of the novel's centerpieces, so conveying and maneuvering their fractured dynamic is essential to the novel's success. Soon I discovered that Claire's mother is distant, a weathered and short-fused husk of herself; her father has vanished after traveling north for work; and her brother, James, storyteller extraordinaire and burgeoning visionary, is six-months gone after leaving suddenly in the night. The lattermost absence has left a yawning hole in Claire's world, as James is not only her brother, but her closest confidante.

My doorway to Claire's relationship with James became accessible through flashbacks into Claire's memories. I also drew James's voice into Claire's inner monologue to illustrate not only their past closeness but also the immediacy of his presence still. The steady incorporation of James into Claire's story underscores his importance to her character and daily life while also questioning the ramifications of his power over her narrative. Being a writer and a first-born son, James dominates their childhood; he initiates their adventures and captures Claire's attention, though his love for his sister is undeniable. However, part of Claire's journey, and one of the most difficult aspects for me to unlock, is her growth toward individual agency and recognizing personal wants. I eventually discovered that Claire also sees the world through words and stories and that her secret passion, one she could never share with her showboat brother, is to write.

Claire's shift towards autonomy is jump-started when a curious and otherworldly sixteen-year-old boy named Lewis Murphy appears and presents Claire a chance at reuniting with James. At this seemingly impossible offer, Claire is confused and wary, but also hopeful. While Lewis is evasive, odd, and quite slippery at times, his presence slowly reminds her what it is like to be seen, even by someone she doesn't totally understand. As Claire grapples with the wounds from her previous losses, she learns how these scars inform her current actions and begins to see herself as someone with all the vinegar necessary to write her own story. Claire's character arc is designed to be gradual and authentic to the journey of healing from grief. To make this transition believable and resonant, I strove to pace her character evolution thoughtfully without neglecting tension and urgency.

Additionally, as *Threads* is a multi-perspective novel, my challenge was to match the intensity, detail, and intrigue of Claire's development to Eli's. While Eli traverses similarly jagged internal terrain, he does so from a very different vantage point as a man in his early twenties born in modern day. A petty thief with especially sticky fingers and a talent for blending into shadows, Eli meets the mysterious and magnetic Maggie one day while stealing records. Unable to resist her eccentric personality, Eli becomes tangled in Maggie's web as well as that of her employers known as the Guild. This group is an organized band of time travelers who artfully tweak history for their client's monetary gain.

They do so by stealing Threads, everyday items so suffused with memory and longing that they allow the holder to journey back to the moment to which they belong. Again, as one who struggles to plot in advance, maneuvering the mechanics of time travel has been a challenge. Though logistics were certainly a consideration, I also contended with how to present traveling visually. Ultimately, I leaned into fantasy, surrendering to the impossible through

whimsical and warm color palettes and images while emphasizing sensory details such as touch and smell to ground the reader in the moment of Eli and Maggie's first trip together.

This scene is important for Eli and Maggie's relationship, which, as it developed, tested my understanding of Eli. I eventually discovered that he, while certainly desperate and obsessive, is not the calculated and aggressive man I once imagined him to be. Like Claire, he too has lost family he would trade nearly anything to recover. He, too, has lost a brother, though, being the elder of the two, Eli's guilt and fear for his brother's safety are perhaps even more intense. Even now, I struggle to discuss Eli's storyline, as it is intentionally shrouded at the novel's opening and well into these pages, creating a layer of mystery which hopefully propels the narrative's tension. Again, pacing has been an element of Eli's character progression that I wrestled with throughout the writing process, especially when measured in relation to Claire's storyline.

Interestingly, one solution I found to drawing closer to my characters was to stand back from them. In Professor Chancellor's course on perspectives, I was introduced to Debra Spark's craft book *Curious Attractions*, in which she writes about perspective and point of view in fiction. Namely, in the chapter "Stand Back," Spark argues for the potential of third person perspectives to achieve a nuanced proximity not always possible in first or second person. As an example, Spark references the opening paragraphs of the novel *Amy and Isabelle* by Elizabeth Strout. Far from the "vaguely patriarchal" stance writers fear in an omniscient narrator, Strout's language, "the intimacy of the colloquial *terribly* before the word *hot* or the chatty *just* before *dead brown snake*—makes this storyteller seem decidedly, and appealingly, human" (Spark 132). I agreed with Spark in this instance and again when analyzing *Hamnet* by Maggie O'Farrell, a completely omniscient novel which also contains extended introductory paragraphs that establish a comforting and authoritative tone. Spark's craft text as well as these literary

models convinced me to explore distance as a means of intimacy and amplify the third-person narration in *Threads* to evoke a human storyteller.

This narrator lends to the nostalgic tone I hoped to capture, which I likened to Natalie Babbitt's *Tuck Everlasting*. While *Threads* is broader in scope and length than Babbitt's novel, I used it as an example both of the aforementioned third-person narration as well as the integration of magical elements into an otherwise commonplace Southern setting. Additionally, I charted the arc of Babbitt's protagonist, Winnie, who, like my protagonist, Claire, must contemplate the opportunity to transcend the limitations of time at a young age. Further in line with the theme of nostalgia, *Threads* is a response to the book that turned me into a reader in the third grade: Christopher Paul Curtis's *Bud, Not Buddy*. Curtis's novel is also set during the Great Depression, although it takes place in the American Midwest rather than the American Southeast. Still, Curtis's atmospheric rendering of the time period and its accompanying economic realities showed me how to build such a world without straying into distracting description or didacticism.

Sharon Creech's *Walk Two Moons* and Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* also signal returns to my childhood reading influences and further exemplified the tone and structure I sought while crafting *Threads*. Creech's novel, my first exposure to the fragmented writing style which has become central to my storytelling, features multiple complementary narratives woven together. This construction results in a concluding payoff which is rewarding as well as wrenching. I attempted to replicate this effect in *Threads*. Further, while Paterson's novel is told in a linear fashion, it contends with grief and loss in a complex, nonlinear manner which is steadily and believably represented. I consistently return to these authors' restraint and attention to character voice as standards for my own work.

While the creative influences I have listed thus far belong to the middle grade or young adult genres, I do not plan to direct my novel exclusively toward a child audience. Alix Harrow's *The Ten Thousand Doors of January* and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* both feature young people as protagonists; however, these novels do not belong to the young adult genre. While the final age classification of *Threads* is not my principal concern, Harrow's and Whitehead's works both offer guidance on navigating young characters in intense situations. Both these authors also exhibit extreme attention to language, specifically in regard to setting. As differentiating between settings and time periods is vitally important in my novel, I intend to imitate Harrow's and Whitehead's techniques. Additionally, *The Ten Thousand Doors of January* inspired my decision to make *Threads* a multi-perspective novel and I will continue to use Harrow's example as I maneuver and balance these perspectives.

In addition to investigating creative inspirations for setting and perspective, I prioritized research for historical accuracy. *Hard Times: Beginnings of the Great Depression in North Carolina, 1929-1933* by John L. Bell Jr. and *North Carolina During the Great Depression: A Documentary Portrait of a Decade* by Anita Price Davis broadly covered multiple topics relevant to my thesis. Chief among these were the tumultuous state of North Carolina's agricultural industry during the Depression, the education structures available to North Carolinian children at this time, and actions taken by the government as well as citizens to procure and preserve food supplies. These works also described health issues such as pellagra common in malnourished North Carolinians and offered statistical information on how race impacted one's experience of the Great Depression.

Many similar topics were illustrated in personal essays produced by survivors of the Depression as part of the "Writing Our Own History" collection housed in the J. Murrey Atkins

Library archives. Written as part of a course at Shepherd's Center of Charlotte in 1992, twenty-five local senior citizens were invited to share their recollections of the Great Depression. These accounts provided invaluable first-hand details on diminished living conditions, unpredictability of employment, and shifting family dynamics. The essayists also frequently supplied anecdotes on specific financial and culinary strategies they used to survive such as dying shoes to wear for multiple seasons, making their own soap, and canning garden-grown food. These strategies, along with descriptions of recreational activities like listening to radio shows and playing community baseball, have all helped to ground my novel in reality.

Additionally, I visited the Heritage Room located in the town hall of Monroe, North Carolina, where donated artifacts associated with Union County history are stored. Here, I studied a wide range of photographs, including those taken by agricultural agents documenting local crops and those depicting main street activities in Monroe as well as Waxhaw, the town upon which Tilly in *Threads* is based. Local newspapers detailing the stock market crash and its fallout as well as government bulletins attempting to manage panic over bank closures also helped me to understand the social and political climate of the period. Lastly, I studied the downtown area of Waxhaw which, while much changed since the 1930s, has maintained some of its original architecture. This time observing Waxhaw's downtown, as well as the downtown of nearby Monroe, allowed me to absorb the texture and atmosphere of these places from a writer's perspective and, therefore, produce a more realistic rendering in my work.

Of course, Tilly is not Waxhaw or Monroe, nor is Claire an exact replica of the girl I saw in the tree. In *The Writing Life*, Annie Dillard unflinchingly tells writers "[y]ou are wrong if you think that you can in any way take the vision and tame it to the page" (57). The vision, the version of the story that exists only in the writer's mind, will invariably become a "changeling"

as it takes to paper (Dillard 57). This the writer must accept, Dillard argues, and this I have slowly, begrudgingly accepted as I have written *Threads*. This novel began with a single image, a piece of fruit, that morphed and shifted, challenging me to release my notion of what I believed it should be. I could not fit every bit of research into this book. I could not send all of the love that my childhood favorites gave to me back in the space of these chapters. What I did instead was “aim for the chopping block” (Dillard 59). To aim for the wood, Dillard writes, is to chip it, to hack away until the wood is splintered. To split the wood, to hit the target, one must aim through it, past it toward some ultimate end. My end was, and still is, to imagine these characters richly and to offer them a chance to tell me their stories. With every swing of the ax, I aimed for their pain, their love, their joy, their fear, and all of the intersections therein.

And when I tired of philosophy and needed concrete, practical writing advice to help this serial short story writer churn out a novel, I turned to *Refuse to Be Done* by Matt Bell. Bell advised that I attempt writing in notebooks, scratch paper, and receipts. This, he argues, helps the words to feel less important, less permanent and I certainly found this to be true. Much of the early chapters of *Threads* are written in notebooks, and when the blinking cursor was too judgmental, I once again found the unassuming lines of my spiral bound. In later stages of revision, I also employed Bell’s tactic of rewriting as opposed to revising. For me, this meant turning to a new page or opening a new document and rewriting what I remembered about a scene without looking at it to see what, if anything, earned its keep. This guidance helped me, as Anne Lamott would say, to take the writing process one step at a time, “bird by bird” as her anecdote goes (19). As I continue writing longform works, namely finishing *Threads*, I hope to maintain this philosophy, treating each chapter, each scene, each sentence with patience and attention, allowing the work to guide me to the destination. However winding the road might be.

Bibliography

- Babbitt, Natalie. *Tuck Everlasting*. 1975. Square Fish, 2015.
- Bell, John L. *Hard Times : Beginnings of the Great Depression in North Carolina, 1929-1933*.
North Carolina Dept. of Cultural Resources, Division of Archives and History, 1982.
- Bell, Matt. *Refuse to Be Done*. Soho Press, 2022.
- Butler, Octavia. *Kindred*. Beacon Press, 2003.
- Creech, Sharon. *Walk Two Moons*. HarperCollins, 1994.
- Curtis, Christopher Paul. *Bud, Not Buddy*. 1999. Yearling, 2002.
- Davis, Anita Price. *North Carolina during the Great Depression : A Documentary Portrait of a Decade*. McFarland & Co., 2003.
- Dillard, Annie. *The Writing Life*. HarperCollins, 1989.
- Doerr, Anthony. *All The Light We Cannot See*. Scribner, 2017.
- Harrow, Alix E. *The Ten Thousand Doors of January*. Redhook, 2020.
- Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird*. Vintage, 1995.
- O'Farrell, Maggie. *Hamnet*. Knopf, 2020.
- Paterson, Katherine. *Bridge to Terabithia*. 1977. HarperCollins, 2017.
- Ruefle, Mary. *Madness, Rack, and Honey*. Wave Books, 2012.
- Spark, Debra. *Curious Attractions : Essays on Fiction Writing*. University of Michigan Press, 2005.
- Strout, Elizabeth. *Amy and Isabelle*. Vintage, 1998.
- Whitehead, Colson. *The Underground Railroad*. Anchor, 2016.

CHAPTER ONE

CLAIRE

There are many hills in the town of Tilly. Well, *many* may be a bit generous.

Five.

There are five very respectable hills in Tilly, each boasting trees that border on noble. What with their gnarled and windworn bark, their roots an embroidery of stately stitches. Many have found themselves hard-pressed to pass these regal beasts without first dipping their heads. See, about time, people have a certain awe soaked to their bones. Those who've borne the years unkneeling hum a song most folks know too well to ignore.

But let's not jump ahead. The point is, there are many hills in Tilly. Five, to be precise. And this story belongs, in part, to one called Sutter.

Raised roughly three dirt roads past the train tracks, tucked in a spit of woods swathed in swaying corn, Sutter Hill sat tall enough to see the Graham's fresh-painted barn and hear their pigs snort through slop. This was all well and good, but apart from Mrs. Graham sometimes snapping a dishcloth at Mr. Graham over whiskey she'd found in the cellar, Sutter's knowledge of town intrigue had dwindled in the years since a most unfortunate incident for which the hill deferred all blame to the sky.

Anyway.

Sutter had for some time relied on passing chatter from field hands on lunch break for news. Passing chatter from field hands and a babbling pair of siblings who often nestled in Sutter's crowning oak. These two spoke much less about the women they'd laid on haylofts and much more about Tilly. Icy Coca-Cola's the boy had swiped from Tucker's General. Lavender soap the girl made with her mother.

Soon the brother and sister spoke of stretch-outs at the cotton mill, then of lay-offs. They spoke of gurgling stomachs and wedding rings pawned for cornmeal money. The temptation of waiting train cars.

Then it was only the girl and she spoke of nothing at all.

That is until one particular morning in May before the sun had woken, when the girl, Claire Plyler, burst onto Sutter as if fire chased her feet.

It started, as things so often do, with boots. See, a truck had just honked a “hurry up” in Claire’s front yard when Claire's mother placed a fresh pair of boots in front of her daughter.

Claire had been so gobsmacked by the sweet leather scent and the unfamiliar weight planting her on the ground that she’d hopped in the truck bed before the question of how finally tickled her sleep-soft mind. They’d been jostling down the drive, heading for the produce stand on Main when Claire asked.

“The typewriter,” her mother said.

Claire, certain she’d misheard over the wheeze of the engine, asked again.

Her mother sat straight-backed. “I sold the typewriter.”

Claire did not recall leaping from the truck, only the pound of landing. She did not recall her mother calling for her into the breeze, only the wind’s push against her back.

She ran, Claire did, to the one place that might understand some of what she’d lost.

Chest heaving, she stood on Sutter Hill beneath a moss-softened oak anyone with sense would bow to. Of course, this tree had known Claire long enough, the pair had given up such formalities.

She unstrung the knots of her now-unwanted boots and pulled them off before beginning her one-handed climb, stopping at the branch from which windchimes of forks and spoons

dangled from twine. Once she reached her favorite nook, Claire tied the bootlaces together and laid them across the branch so the boots hung in the air. Where they'd stay, she decided. She would not bring them home, no matter how many slaps from the belt she'd owe. She would not wear them.

"Damn it," she whispered, her voice pulled tight.

Her head fell back and twin streams leaked down her temples. Through a veil of tittering leaves, the hazy gray sky cast shadows onto her skin.

Claire spun the beads of her fraying bracelet with her thumb. She spun the beads and listened to squirrels bolt along the branches. Acorns knocked bark as they tumbled to the ground. Soon she'd have to find a new string for the bracelet. She'd already been through two ribbons and some yarn. Maybe this time she'd bargain at Tucker's for something stronger.

James had found the bracelet limp in the clay dirt the first morning he dragged her to Sutter. He'd hoisted Claire out her bedroom window while she was still puffy-eyed. The screen door's squealing hinges would wake their parents, he told her. She'd stumbled along after him in her nightshirt. The bracelet, in all its mismatched glass, was less a gift and more a way to keep her from asking one more time where he was taking her.

That was a year ago now. And it had been weeks since Claire had been to this spot. Since spring had bloomed and the produce stand re-opened, she'd spent her dawns juggling onions instead.

She sighed as the leaves gossiped like town biddies. They whispered how the strange girl was back but not the other. Not that songbird boy who swung from the branches, singing and rattling the peace. Where was he, they wondered. Where had he gone?

Claire swiped at her tears and pulled her knees in as though that might keep out the whispers or break that tug in her belly that came with thinking of James. It didn't help, of course.

The tug only broke when a twig snapped on the ground beneath her. Claire lurched forward only to find a trio of deer grazing the dewy grass. She wiped a hand down her face, calluses scraping her cheeks. Behind her eyes, she saw her mother's face, clear and empty.

I sold the typewriter.

Something hot zipped up Claire's chest and into her throat. Whatever it was might have spewed from her mouth and onto Sutter's most favored oak had the sun not intervened.

Now, it has been said that the sun preferred Sutter Hill over the other four Tilly standards. This was strictly hearsay, but to see it rise before Claire that morning, well. Truth has been known to nest in rumor.

As always, a few teasing rays peeked out first, poking through the feeble tree line that stood between Sutter and the Graham's green sea of corn. James had told Claire once that those first few beams were the sun's fingers. It reached them out, searching, he said, like the sky was a dark room where someone might be hiding. A vengeful moon, perhaps.

It really was a wonder her brother had friends, talking like that.

Anyhow, those scouting fingers must've found the coast clear, because not a moment later the sun rose like a slow blush on Sutter's face. Gentle warmth climbed Claire's bare legs as it had that first morning she and her brother waited together for the sunrise. As it had so many mornings since.

How funny that this morning should become so different. That a typewriter, sold for a pair of nearly new boots, and one girl's decision to run could change everything.

Claire wound her finger around a loose thread fluttering from the hem of her feed sack dress and was about to tear it loose when one of the deer trio stiffened. She glanced up and nearly fell.

Walking up from the field was a boy.

The wrong boy.

This one wasn't made of smooth, cursive lines like her brother. This one was a spider, all thin and spindly. Hell, if he turned sideways, he might've disappeared. Claire willed him very strongly to do just that and, for a moment, believed her will had won out.

But he wasn't turning. The boy wavered on his feet. Between one blink and the next, he sank like an egg yolk dropped from a thumb-split shell.

Claire chewed her cheek, waiting.

With all the tall tales James had told her, dragons under clouds and ghosts between corn stalks seemed normal as a Tuesday afternoon. Surely, her mind could conjure a boy falling down. Yes, that was it. She was merely seeing him. He couldn't be her problem, he wasn't even *there*.

Perhaps she would have believed that if the leaves hadn't stopped their chatter and if every creature nearby hadn't ceased putting its lungs to use, but no. All that lived on Sutter held its breath save the oak, which carried on unperturbed. The tree had seen its share of excitement and was no longer prone to such melodrama.

Claire counted to ten. The boy did not stir.

"Shit."

She counted ten more.

Then she leapt from the branch.

He was breathing.

That was good, she guessed.

Though, he didn't seem to be having an easy time of it, being facedown and all. At this rate he'd probably wake up with half the dirt in Tilly up his nose. She considered who she would tell first that there was a nearly-dead boy on Sutter. Whoever she told would probably shake their head and say the place was as good as cursed. They said it often enough anyway.

Claire stopped a good few feet from him. The deer had scattered the second she jumped from the oak, so she was well and truly alone.

She sniffed. The air around him reeked of the peppermint oil her aunt had given Mama for the headaches. That and something else. Something just shy of burning. Might have been whatever the boy had slathered in his hair. It was combed back slick and sharp as crow feathers. A few loose strands lifted in the breeze.

She should get somebody, Claire thought. Even if they told her she was crazy and to stay away from Sutter or did nothing at all and the boy died here, at least she'd have unloaded this stranger from her plate.

Claire crept forward a few more inches, grass needling her toes. He wasn't a spider, she decided now that she was closer to him. With his crisp white shirt and fine black pants, he could have been a stork, though. It was the legs, really. He was made of them.

Next to one of the boy's slack hands was an envelope, folded and torn. Something had been written on it in cramped handwriting, but whatever it was had been partially blotted out by dew. Claire leaned in to read it.

The boy shifted and Claire jerked back. He let out a sort of mumble and then settled again.

A dot of sweat began to roll down her neck and Claire lifted her chin-long hair to clear its path. If she left the boy there, he'd be cooked midway through the afternoon. She glanced back towards the woods.

What's the plan, Looney?

Claire ground her teeth. Her brother would've had a plan put together by now. He'd be churning a story about where this kid had come from, how he'd gotten here. James would know what to do with him. Whereas Claire stood there, looming over this stranger's maybe-dying body.

You could always invite him for coffee with Mama.

Another drop of sweat fell down her spine. In the time before, and even at the beginning of the end, there were always passers-by or folks from Tilly sipping from one of Mama's chipped cups, dunking cornbread into the fresh brew. Steam would curl up into their faces as Mama rubbed their cracked hands with Crisco or simply listened as tears dripped into their cups.

Claire's daddy used to say Mama drew pain out of people with her listening. Claire believed that. From the time she was young, she'd seen neighbors walk in weary-backed, travelers weighed-down by trouble, walk out of the Plyler house lighter.

Nowadays Mama used Crisco for cooking and coffee was a treasure too dear to be shared. Nobody walked into their house save Claire and her mother and they each walked out in the morning heavier still.

I sold the typewriter.

Her thumb traced the words into her thigh, as it did whenever Claire's mind labored on a phrase. It helped her to give shape to letters that spelled out such an impossible thing. It drew a bit of the pain out.

Claire nudged the boy's side.

He didn't move.

Claire huffed and nudged with pepper. That is to say, she kicked him.

The boy grunted and sputtered, lifting his head. He scrunched his face and blinked at the ground before twisting to look up at her.

"Seems like you could use a hand," she said.

His dark eyes darted around, then returned to Claire.

She cleared her throat. "Well, come on then."

He watched her the way James watched people. To riddle them out.

He said nothing.

Claire stepped away from the boy. Made of legs or not, she knew the woods better than he did, better than anyone who wasn't James. She'd almost pivoted to bolt when he pushed himself up and clapped his smooth, lean hand into hers.

Once when Claire was waist high to her mother, she played tag in the loft of her uncle's barn. Her cousin had dashed toward the loft's edge, and Claire chased after him, blind to the drop off. At the last moment, her cousin veered, and then there were no more hay bales under her feet. A farmhand's daughter had snatched Claire's hand, holding her as she swung, legs kicking over the barn floor.

The girls clutched each other for only a second or two before Claire's cousins hauled her up, but Claire remembered how it felt to touch someone whose fingers had been the slim difference between the air and the ground.

She blinked at the boy and he at her.

"Right," she said and helped him up.

She had just enough time to gather that he was about a head and a half taller than her before his knees gave out.

It took him two more tries to stay upright. One of those times, he'd stood only to see the envelope on the ground and dive for it like it was one of his young.

The boy leaned on her the whole way back through the woods, one arm wrapped around her shoulder. His right ankle had twisted during one of his falls and he could hardly put weight on it without hissing. If that wasn't bad enough, every move seemed to make him dizzy. Getting him over fallen trees and across the footbridge had been a real treat for Claire and a real show for the scurrying creatures nearby. A few times he'd turned so pale Claire half expected he'd lose his stomach.

What a finale that would have been.

Only when the peeling paint and sagging porch of her house came into view did Claire begin to squirm. Her mother would not have turned around that morning. She'd shouted Claire's name as her daughter jumped from the truck bed, sure, but hadn't told the men driving to stop. No, she'd be at the produce stand. And while this knowledge eased the nerves wriggling under Claire's skin, her lips still twitched to imagine her mother's face had she seen Claire walk through the door with a boy draped over her like a burlap sack.

Claire kept that thought close as she opened the door to find Merl, spitting.

“Enough of that,” Claire said. The boy wobbled again, muttering to himself “God” and “No”.

She pushed past the wood stove, past Merl, and into her room. The cat posted himself at the door while Claire lowered the boy onto her bed.

“Go ahead and lie down,” she told him.

Her grandmother’s flowery quilt was corkscrewed with her threadbare sheets, but the boy didn’t seem to notice. The mattress springs creaked as he eased himself back onto her pillow.

She snatched the overalls she’d been patching and a shirt off the floor and stuffed them into the narrow dresser on the opposite wall. When she looked over her shoulder at the boy, he was staring at the ceiling in a hollow sort of way. His shirt had come untucked so a sliver of skin peeked out at her. A blush heated Claire’s cheeks. She’d brought a boy who wasn’t her blood to her bedroom. Let him lay on the bed her grandmother had died on. The bed where her mother was born.

And she was alone. As Claire swept a pile of patches into her dresser drawer, her eye caught on one of the sewing needles. She considered it, turning the feeble thing between her finger and thumb. Once, her dresser kept a switchblade handy.

It had been a while since Claire had thought of the blade and the man who gave it to her. Of course, a week, an hour, even a handful of minutes seems long when forgetting the man who lullabied you to sleep with a song he’d written or who carried you to church on his shoulders.

Two years ago, on her twelfth birthday, her dad had taken her into the yard. By that point, the market crash had become a cloud they couldn’t see the sky through. They didn’t have money for sugar, let alone cake. One present would have meant nobody ate. So, when her daddy pressed

a small box tied with a green ribbon into her hand, she'd hardly known what to say. Inside had been a small switchblade carved with his initials. It was one she'd seen him use to peel an apple or slice through a bag of seed for as long as she could remember. Claire tried to give it back to him.

"I want you to have it, Looney." His voice had roughened by then. When he sang with James, his voice was bass sandpaper scratching her brother's tenor.

"Why?" she'd asked him.

Her father kicked at the ground, seeming far away. "The world isn't always so kind as you."

A few days later, she learned about Chicago.

"For a few months. To get our feet back under us."

Claire never thought to ask how many months made up a few, but after a while she'd stopped wondering.

As scorched peppermint met her nose again, she regretted having thrown her daddy's switchblade into the creek. There was still the shotgun, of course, but perched above the front door, it wasn't close enough to make a quick difference. She tucked the little needle into her dress pocket and turned to find the boy sitting up, leaning over her yellowed, dog-eared *King Arthur and His Knights*. She'd fallen asleep reading it the night before. The cracked spine held her place.

"That's mine," she said.

The boy didn't seem to hear her. He traced his thin fingers over the cover's illustration. Now that he wasn't fainting, he looked more her brother's side of fifteen than hers. Faint stubble shadowed his jaw.

Claire bunched her hands in her skirt. She wished he'd put the book down. She didn't have space in her head to relive the night it had stopped being her brother's.

Hey, Looney, wake up. We're going.

What are you – going where?

Anywhere.

“What's your name?” she asked.

The boy ignored her, easing the front cover open.

We can't just go.

I found a way. Trust me.

But – Mama –

Mama's waiting for something that's never coming back to her.

Claire licked her lips. “Listen, you seem to be doing okay now and my father'll be home soon, so it'd probably be best if you cleared out.”

The boy lifted his brows.

I need you to be brave with me, Looney.

James, we can't.

Claire –

I can't.

She raised her chin. “Hey.”

The boy looked up.

Be brave with me.

“I don't know you and, seeing as you're not keeling over, you've got to go.”

He stood, placing the book down on the bed behind him. His legs really went on forever, she thought as they watched each other.

“Claire,” he said.

Her heart beat in her fingers.

Be brave.

“How do you know me?”

He moved toward her, unevenly with his bad ankle. “I know James.”

Claire shook her head.

The boy took one more limping step her way. “I need -”

But Claire would not find out yet what he needed as a certain tabby had become concerned for his mistress’s safety as well as weary of his own exclusion. Electing to remind all parties of his presence, Merl shot across the floor, sinking teeth and claws into the boy’s calf.

The shout that rang out could be heard by all of Tilly’s hills. Some say the leaves of a certain live oak cackled at the sound.

CHAPTER TWO

ELI

Some years and miles away from Tilly and Sutter and the cackling leaves, the sky and its ever-watchful stars spied the likes of Eli Dolen, a man who was not unaccustomed to shouting. Though there were not usually cats involved, nor were his typically laughing matters.

When Eli was eight, his father overextended himself at the horses or the tables. Eli never found out which nor did he care to. The point was that a couple of men came by their house on the wharf to acquaint Mr. Dolen with the consequences of unpaid debts.

It was evening. Young Eli had been halfway through a bowl of Apple Jacks his mother had poured for dinner when a knock came at the door. The men waited until Eli's father had pressed his face to the peephole before bursting in. Eli recalled the blood flushed down his father's chin as he'd pleaded with the man nudging a pistol at Eli's forehead.

Eli remembered his mother screaming, hunched into her pregnant belly in the corner. A keening doe, back jack-knifed on the side of the road. It was the way creatures screamed when the only thing left to stand between them and the worst trouble was the sound of their own voice.

The men had gone eventually, but not without his father's bloodstained rings in their pockets and a promise to return should Eli's father step so much as a toe out of line. Eli's family left Boston soon after for a coast with palm trees and, Eli's mother thought, fewer temptations. This would not be the case, of course, but again, we mustn't skip ahead.

The Eli the sky watched now, strewn like wet laundry in an alleyway, believed himself to have left boyhood far behind. And yet he could not escape the screaming. It pierced him still,

only the voice belonged to another woman and this time there was no one, nothing to barter with.

He woke with the blast of a car horn ringing in his teeth. It took him more than a moment to realize he was on his stomach, cold asphalt hard against his cheek. Perhaps it was the darkness or that his lips were torn and his mouth tasted like salt that made him think some asshole had gotten ahold of him on the street. He groaned as he rolled onto his back and sloshed into a puddle. The cool water that soaked his clothes came as a relief. His breath drew in hiccups. His head drummed to the sprinting rhythm in his chest.

Above him, in a thin stretch of night sky between two brick walls, stars poked through the haze of streetlights to wink at him. The flirts. To be fair, they'd been tracing his story for some time now, and knew it would be worth seeing through.

A bit preoccupied, Eli did not wink back, but after a series of grunts, managed to sit. His right wrist pulsed and those few stars multiplied in his spinning vision.

“So what are you?”

He blinked toward the voice. He made out a collection of glistening garbage bags and soggy cardboard boxes. The shape of a dumpster.

“What...?” Another horn blared behind him. He turned his pounding head to the road. An SUV rushed by, splashing water onto the sidewalk and blinding him with its high beams.

Maybe it was the flash or the faint burning smell that recalled Eli's memory to him. None can say, but as he sat there, he saw it all again in pieces.

A picture frame flying from his hand, smashing against the mantle.

Ceruleans eyes wide beside another sweaty, crinkle-browed face.

A shove against Eli's chest sending him backwards as he grasped at the air in front of him. Paper ripped from his hands. A crack like splintering wood.

Seizing a weak, frayed strand. Holding on.

"No," he said.

Eli patted down his pockets. He felt the ground around him but found only the oily asphalt and something soft that squealed and leapt away from his touch.

It was no use, of course. Had what he sought been there, he wouldn't be.

"No, no."

"You're not from here, I can tell."

At last Eli spotted a gleaming pair of eyes against the wall by the dumpster.

"Where am I?" Eli's words were slurred and thick in his ruined mouth.

"I can tell things like that," the voice said.

Eli looked back again at the road, hoping maybe he was wrong. Maybe he was where he'd meant to go after all. An F150 sped by.

"Shit. *Shit.*"

He called out, "Hey."

"Don't want trouble, now."

"Did you see anyone else?"

"Don't know what you mean."

"Was there anyone else here? Did you see...was anyone with me when I got here?" With any luck they'd gotten tangled and he was not alone, Eli thought. With any luck he would find them nearby.

It is worth mentioning that luck, unlike the sky and her stars, was not especially fond of Eli.

“Nope. Think I would have noticed.”

Eli rubbed his aching neck. “I - I need...” he said.

“Hm?”

He rolled to his hands and knees. Something scuttered past him and knocked into stray soup cans. The aluminum clinked softly. Eli took a deep breath before he rose to his feet, an unsteady foal. “I need to go.”

“Mm. Well, good luck to you then.”

He didn’t spare the person by the dumpster another glance. He’d already talked too long. He’d been seen landing, for Christ’s sake. The Guild would shit a brick.

As he emerged from the alley onto the sidewalk, Eli combed his hands through his coarse hair, trying to coax it down. He quickly gave up the lost cause and instead zipped up his oversized corduroy jacket to hide that his thin cotton shirt had torn. The overalls he wore were straight leg and sopping, rolled up at the bottom over a pair of laced work boots.

He was already sweating in the heat, but he’d worry about new clothes later. His beaten face was more likely to attract attention than a few outdated fashion choices. He hiked up his collar, hoping to hide the worst of it from the trickle of flip-flopped, crop-topped people milling around.

Eli stopped dead at the neon sign over the bar across the street. “Willie’s” it read, only the “W” flickered in and out, so at the moment it was “illie’s”. In the front lot, a white Impala with a license plate that read DOLEN took up a spot and a half. The last time Eli had seen the

bar, newspaper blocked out the windows and a sign advertised the new seafood joint soon to take its place. The last time Eli had seen his father's car, it was wrapped around a tree.

Eli turned on his heel, breathed through his nose as sweat cooled his upper lip. Outside a post office a few doors down, a rack of newspapers sat under an awning. Eli lifted a copy.

July 12, 2010.

When he closed his eyes on the slick, humid street, he didn't hear Maggie screaming. Instead he saw her cross-legged on his bed, the blankets piled up around her.

What happens if we get separated? he'd asked her.

She'd smiled and held his chin. *I'm not worried about it.*

Why not?

She'd pressed her lips softly to his. *You'll find me.*

The second face appeared to him again. Lips parted, stare shocked.

He dropped the newspaper onto the rack and backed away, hands interlaced behind his head.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry."

Around Eli, young men laughed on restaurant patios, drunk on the balmy night. A musician strummed an acoustic "Brown-Eyed Girl" while a stray dog listened. An old woman, towel thrown over her shoulder, jaywalked across traffic toward the shore.

All this the sky, the pinprick stars, hardly noticed because Eli had rounded the corner, refusing so much as a backward glance for the Impala. He walked as if to dare anyone into his path.

You'll find me, she'd said.

He would find them both, he told himself. They would all make it home.

CHAPTER THREE

CLAIRE

It took Claire a minute or two to peel Merl off the boy's leg.

Her father had found the cat in a gutter outside Mr. Tucker's general store on his way home one evening. The poor thing had clearly twisted out of the jaws of some larger animal and sported a festering back leg to prove it. He'd been one sleep from the other side when Claire's father delivered him wrapped in a jacket. Unlike the switchblade, she had no intention of tossing Merl into the creek.

The boy might've had ideas to the contrary. He sat with his elbows on the kitchen table smoothing one eyebrow with his fingers. Claire wrung out the rag she'd run under the tap and held it out for him. She supposed they had bandages somewhere, but she wasn't of the mind to go rifling through her mother's things, especially with the boy here taking up space, watching her.

"For your leg," she said.

The boy took the rag. "Thanks."

He rolled up his sliced-through pant leg. Those weren't cotton or corduroy, but real fancy suit trousers. She'd seen a pair on a man in the soup line at church. Someone said he used to sell Fords over in Monroe. Claire remembered thinking how important the man looked. Of course, if he was in the soup line at a church in Tilly, looking important probably hadn't done him all the good he'd hoped.

"He's not rabid is he?"

Claire returned her gaze to his face, realizing it probably looked as though she'd been ogling his spider leg. He didn't seem to mind, though. He blinked at her, waiting.

“No,” she said.

He mopped his scratches. Merl had only pierced the skin in a few places. At least it wasn't the boy's bad ankle, Claire thought. At least now he was sort of even.

“Just a guard cat, then?” He smirked at her.

Claire prickled. “Merl's protective.”

“So I gathered.” He talked like a Yankee. A Yankee plus something else Claire couldn't name. A Yankee who didn't spend enough time with other Yankees to know how to talk.

The boy paused his mopping. “Merl?”

“Yes.” The boy's smirk widened to match the deepening of Claire's scowl. “Short for Merlin.”

She couldn't imagine why she'd told him that. She hadn't told anybody who didn't live in this house, not even her cousins. Not that her cousins knew Merlin from their own backsides, but the bottom line was she hadn't told them.

“Oh, yeah?” Whatever about his smile had made her itch before was gone.

“Yes.”

“Like the wizard?”

“Yes.”

“Do you say anything other than ‘yes’?”

“I - yes.”

“Mm,” the smirk was back, but only half as greasy as the first.

Claire's jaw ticked. She scraped a chair back and took a seat across from the boy. “I don't think I'm the one who should be answering questions.”

The boy heaved himself up and limped to the sink. Over the faucet's gush he asked, "What would you like to ask me?"

She watched his back. His stooped neck reminded her of men who lived bent over crops or working in the mill. Whoever this boy was, he kept his head down. "Your name."

He turned and leaned against the counter. "That's fair. I'm Lewis."

"Got a last name, Lewis?"

The boy's mouth screwed up in a would-be smile. "Murphy."

"Lewis Murphy." There were no Murphy's within Tilly limits. Not that Claire thought he was from here. He held himself like a tall drink on an August afternoon. Every church lady would've tripped over herself talking about such a boy. Claire never could've escaped his name. "How do you know me?"

"I told you. I know James."

It had been months since she'd heard her brother mentioned like that. Not under someone's breath or trailing a sideways glance. Without any weight hanging off it.

"How do you know my brother?"

Lewis bit his lip and bobbed his head in deep thought. "That's a little complicated, Claire."

Claire fixed him with a stare that would've brought pride to her mother. "I'll keep up, Lewis."

The small smile again. The one from when he'd asked about Merlin. He looked about to speak but instead held a hand over his stomach. He curled in like it hurt him.

"Sorry. I haven't eaten in a while," he said.

A laugh bubbled out of her before she could muzzle it. "Nobody's eaten in a while."

He quirked his brow.

“With the Depression and all,” she said.

His eyes widened a bit and he nodded. “Right. Of course,” he said.

So, he wasn’t a hobo, then. That or he’d hit his head harder than she’d thought. To forget the Depression was something unless she had a runaway Vanderbilt in her kitchen.

Made her wonder who in God’s name James had gotten himself caught up with. He’d always talked about being grand, her brother had, especially closer to his leaving. His stories became less about knights at round tables and more about himself, who he would be. A leader of men, he used to say. A new kind of Arthur. A glint had sharpened in his eye that Claire didn’t know how to smooth.

Trust me, Looney.

She still trusted him. And he’d sent her this strange boy.

Claire looked out the window and tapped her nails against the table.

Lewis kept holding his stomach.

Trust me.

She sighed and got up from her chair. “Hope you like potatoes.”

As it happened, he did. Almost as quickly as Claire fried them, Lewis shoveled them into his mouth like he couldn’t remember his last meal. Maybe he wasn’t a Vanderbilt. Or maybe he’d been kicked out of the guild.

Claire rolled her eyes at herself. Nearly six months without her brother hadn’t kept her from thinking the way he spoke. James’s teachers never knew whether to be impressed or suspicious of him. It was hard to tell sometimes if he was trying to have a conversation or talk

circles around you. Well, hard for normal people. The Plylers had always fancied themselves a bit out of the ordinary. Those around them tended to agree.

“Keep that up and you’ll burn yourself,” she said to the back of Lewis’s head.

She scraped her spatula under the cubed potatoes and flipped them. They sizzled in the popping oil. She’d almost tossed some of the salt pork from the government into the skillet but thought better of it. A potato or two might escape her mother’s notice, but Mama’d never miss so much as a scrape of fat from the pork block.

Claire laid a rag on the table and placed the skillet down, nabbing herself a fork along the way. She’d eat straight from the skillet if Lewis left any for her. No use dirtying another dish she’d have to wash.

When Claire reclaimed her spot across from him, he looked to be making eyes at the windowsill. She could tell his mind was someplace else, though. She skewered a potato and held it up to her mouth, waiting for it to cool.

“All right,” she said and just as quickly wished she hadn’t.

The way he’d been focusing on the windowsill, now he focused on her and this time, his mind tagged along.

Whatever had polished his hair back had well and truly surrendered in the heat. Long strands were tucked behind his ears, save the few that fell into his face and curled at the ends. His eyelashes had to be the longest she’d seen on anybody. They were darker than the hair on his head and somehow made his eyes look darkest of all.

“All right,” he repeated back to her.

With the hand that wasn’t holding her fork, Claire patted down her own frizzing wheat blonde hair.

She cleared her throat. “All right. Where’d you come from? I’m assuming you weren’t born down this morning on Sutter so...what’ve you been up to the rest of your life?”

He drummed his fingers on his chin. “What’s Sutter?”

“Sutter’s the name of the hill. Also, the name of the kid who got struck by lightning next to the tree on the hill.”

Lewis wiped the corners of his mouth with his fingers. “Did he die?”

Claire shook her head. “He’s still kicking. Little twitchy nowadays. And most people around here think the hill’s cursed. It’s why me and James like it.”

She picked at her nails. She hadn’t meant to say that last part. She hadn’t realized it was true until it was out of her mouth.

“I’m from Wisconsin,” Lewis said.

Her eyebrows shot up. “Wisconsin? The hell are you doing down here?”

“I’m looking for something.”

“In Tilly? Dressed like that?”

“I...yeah.”

She sat back. “You said you knew James.”

“I did.”

Claire could not stab this boy with a fork at her mother’s table. She could not. And yet. “*How* do you know him?”

“We’re friends.”

“How’d you meet him?”

“On a job.”

Her grip on the fork tightened. “Lewis Murphy.”

“Claire.”

Steam wafted off the potatoes between them. Neither blinked.

“Where is my brother?”

He studied like he was working out a knotted rope. “I don’t know,” he said.

Her stomach dropped as he leaned toward her.

“That’s why I’m here. He needs our help.”

CHAPTER FOUR

ELI

Eli was a thief.

His father had refused responsibility for this and rightly so. Despite what Eli used to believe and where Eli's mother would have laid blame had she known, Eli's itch to take was not borne of his father's need to win.

No. Eli had been tuned to hear chords beneath melodies. He had been made to seek the strings and keep them for his own.

This was not something he could have explained to his mother, even once Maggie had explained it to him. When the family first moved to South Carolina, Mrs. Dolen jumped at every sound outside. A visit from the mailman sent her scrambling for the knife block. Their father had the doorbell disconnected after a string of panic attacks landed her in the ER one Halloween. Eli had dressed up as a doctor that year. The nurses on call got a real kick out of it.

By the time she found out that Eli's father had gotten in with a ring of petty thieves picking pockets across Charleston, she'd been too strung out on Klonopin and box Chardonnay to do more than ask him to keep that shit the fuck away from their sons. Eli's father promised and kept that promise until Eli turned eighteen and wanted a job that didn't involve bacon grease and non-slip shoes. Eli had never been good with books. He kept his spot in the back left corner of class and his C-average through high school but college was never on his path.

Eli's dad brought him to a warehouse downtown after graduation and introduced him to a slew of men with buzzed hair and baggy leather jackets. Eli picked out pink laces on one pair of sneakers, cigarette stains around one thin mouth, an obsessive nail biter. Otherwise, he wouldn't

have known them from any other men on the street. It didn't help that they all seemed to go by Mike. This was the point, his father told him. To disappear.

Eli hadn't chopped his hair, but he learned to blend into shadow as well as any Mike. Better even. His hands had a way of finding whatever people wanted least to lose. The Mikes started calling him Slip.

For five years, he'd kept the secret from his mother. Up until she'd died six months ago, she thought Eli built websites in a cubicle downtown.

He wished that had been the truth. Maybe then he wouldn't be in a gas station diner huddled over a cup of black coffee and a stale cheese danish trying to cover his scraped-up face with a hoodie he'd nabbed from Goodwill.

Eli sipped from his mug. He'd waited until it was near cold to keep from burning his shredded lip.

"Can I get you anything else?" the waitress asked. The woman eyed his mouth like he owed her an explanation.

"No," he said.

She nodded but didn't walk away. "Is the other guy gonna be stopping by soon?"

Eli started. "What?"

She gestured to his face.

"Oh. No."

A small tug brought his attention to the hand the waitress rested on her hip. A ring dotted with small sapphires wrapped around her pinky. A sadness laced that pull. It sang of something lost.

"That's a nice ring," he said.

She spun it with her thumb. “Thanks. Belonged to my mother.”

“Mm. Wedding ring?” He said it while picking at his danish, as though he didn’t care too much. As though he was being nice.

“Promise ring, actually. My dad died before they could get married. She wore the ring around anyway so people wouldn’t give her the hairy eyeball about having a kid.”

He nodded. “Makes sense. Must’ve been pretty tough for her. How old was she when she had you?”

“Eighteen,” the waitress said, ducking her chin.

Eli guessed the waitress was in her late thirties. Her mother would’ve been born in the 50s. Too late. Way too late.

He smiled as best he could without bursting a scab. “She sounds like a strong lady.”

The waitress’s orange lipstick grin wobbled a little at the edges. “She was.”

Someone called for the check and the waitress rapped her knuckles on the back of the booth before walking off. He knew without watching her that she turned back to look at him. He could feel her eyes.

Eli pinched the bridge of his nose to relieve the pressure in his head. He needed a plan. He’d spent last night wandering the nearest bus depot. Maggie had told him once that members of the Guild often left contacts in traveling hubs for those who’d screwed up and needed help. At least one of the phone numbers on the bathroom wall should belong to a member, she’d said. He’d tried calling from a pay phone but either he hadn’t phrased himself right or everyone he’d reached was a hooker.

He’d thought about looking up someone by name, but most of them used aliases and, hell, he didn’t know if they’d even formed The Guild yet. He didn’t want to think about the kind

of chaos he would cause if he showed up to that asshole Lance's house before the guy'd had the idea.

He needed an aspirin.

Not for the first time, Eli wondered, had he spotted Maggie first, if everything would have been different. Maybe he would have seen the girl with hair straightened to a brittle, broken-end bob and liner smeared up her eyelid and thought better of it. Maybe he didn't have the brains for a four-year university but he liked to believe he could spot trouble when he saw it fingering vinyl records across the room.

He'd asked her one night in the bathtub if she thought there was a world where they didn't know each other. She'd blown a handful of bubbles at him and said no.

There's no version of this where you aren't mine.

Once he would've called bullshit on a line like that, but he'd learned quickly that disbelieving Maggie was a losing proposition. Not that he'd ever really resisted her. The truth was, since the day he'd first seen her in Pack Rat Records, he'd been a boat tracking the blink of a lighthouse, following her blinking ray as if it were a sure path home.

"Can I help you?" Maggie had asked him that day.

Eli remembered jumping out of his skin. He hadn't heard so much as a whisper of her moving toward him. He'd casually slid the second-hand Bowie sleeve back into its spot and picked his stuffed backpack off the ground. By then he'd gotten so used to stealing what he needed, he sometimes took because he could.

"No. Thanks."

She'd watched him the way people sometimes did when he stood still long enough to let them. As if they knew he had something up his sleeve and wanted to know what it was. As if he was a cipher they could break by staring.

Eli stared back the way that said *give it your best shot*.

She'd held up her hand, flat like a server. In it sat a Magic 8 ball.

"Ask a question," she said.

He hadn't responded. He was busy trying to work her out.

"Come on."

"Do you work here?" he said.

She shook the 8 ball and peered at the answer before showing him.

My sources say no.

She leaned against the nearest shelf. "Ask a better one."

Her eyes were the color of the tanks at the mall aquarium. Against her eyeliner and black hair, they glowed.

"What's your name?"

She blinked at him, then shook the 8 ball. She didn't bother looking before showing him.

Reply hazy, try again.

"I guess I'm not very good at this," he'd said.

A slight smile drew at her lips.

"Can I have your number?" He hadn't been sure what he was doing.

She shook and held out her hand.

Outlook good.

He'd pulled his phone from his pocket. The Android had cracked during a quick getaway on a job with Nail Biter Mike and now the screen was a spiderweb. She traced her finger over the lines. As soon as she handed the phone back, she turned to leave.

"I'll see you." He looked down at the contact. "Maggie."

She hadn't turned back. The bell over the door jangled as she left.

"You sure I can't get you some ice for that?"

Eli's head snapped toward the waitress. She hovered, gesturing to his face.

He dropped a twenty he'd slipped from some suit two booths over onto the table. "I'm sure. Thank you."

He shuffled past her and shouldered the door open. The light on the street probed his head.

He needed an aspirin. He needed a plan.

CHAPTER FIVE

CLAIRE

Her Uncle Taylor propped his hands on his hips as he dragged a graying handkerchief along his neck, watching Lewis.

“Nice to meet you, son,” Taylor said.

Lewis’s smile was a straight line. “You too, sir.”

He lingered behind Claire, her reluctant shadow.

“Where you from?” Taylor asked.

“He’s from Wisconsin,” Claire said.

Taylor’s eyes widened without losing their squint. “That so. What’re you doing down here?”

Lewis opened his mouth but Claire was faster. “One of Daddy’s old friends is visiting. He’s her son.”

Taylor rocked back on his heels. “Your daddy always did have lots of women friends. Staying with you and your mama are they?”

“Yessir.”

“Isn’t that nice. Well, what do you need Claire? Just so happens I’ve got a few things to do today besides talking to you.”

Lewis wandered away from them toward the farmhouse with his head tilted as if he were listening for something.

“Little off, that one,” Taylor said without lowering his voice.

“Yeah.” Part of Claire wished she’d come alone. Lewis had leapt at the mention of going for supplies and it wasn’t as though she could leave him at home. She didn’t want him out of her

sight, especially not alone with her mother's lockbox and a shotgun lying about. Who knew what she'd find missing when she got back.

"I need chicken wire to fix the coop," she said.

"What happened to the chicken coop?" Taylor asked her.

"Coyote."

"Coyote? When?"

"Just the other night."

It wasn't Claire's most original lie, but it was certainly better than the one she would tell next, and she thought that perhaps leading with this one would butter Taylor up. He liked nothing better than an easily fixable problem. It was why he wouldn't be bothered with her and James and their parents. He shunned anything he couldn't make into quick sense.

"I'll send one of the boys over," he said.

"The boys are busy." That at least was true. No doubt all her cousins had been up the night before shelling peas and butterbeans until they had enough to bathe in.

"Everybody's busy. Except you and your friend it seems. I'll send one of the boys."

"No." Claire fought her shifting feet as Taylor stared her down. "Like you said, I've got time on my hands. So does my friend over there." Lewis leaned against a tree picking his nails.

"I just need the wire."

Taylor looked between Claire and Lewis. He shook his head. "Chicken wire's in the shed. Help yourself."

"Thank you." She cleared her throat. "Actually, since I'm here - I just had an idea."

"What's that?"

"I need a tent."

“Come again?”

“For camping.”

Taylor popped a hip and crossed his arms. “Camping.”

“Yessir, I think it’ll help Mama. Make her feel better.”

“The moods, you mean.”

“Yessir. I think she needs some fresh air. Some peace and quiet.”

Good one, Looney. Really.

“Huh.” Taylor pouted his mouth like he was thinking. “Yes, I imagine fresh air’s hard to come by around here. Peace and quiet, too. All these buildings. Noise. People.”

As he listed, he swept his arms around toward the fields, to the warbling birds in the nearby orchards, and the clang of Aunt Alice’s canning jars coming through the open windows of the house.

“Yep. I can see why she’d need to camp out. Course, she could always stop by a Hooverville. I’m sure there’s plenty of hobos willing to share a tent with her. Hell, maybe she’d find your daddy there.”

“Hooverville, huh?”

Claire started. She hadn’t heard Lewis come up behind her. The circles under his eyes had darkened since they’d left the house and every minute he spent standing looked to be costing him. She’d have another mess on her hands if he passed out in front of Taylor. At this rate, she was going to sweat through her dress.

“Lewis -”

“You’ll have to forgive me, I’m not great with southern geography. Hooverville, is that nearby?”

Taylor quirked an eyebrow. “You being slick with me, boy?”

“No, sir. Just trying to understand. If we need to take Claire’s mother to Hooverville to find Claire’s father, I want to make sure I pack right. Especially since it doesn’t sound like you’ll be lending us a tent.”

Watching them, Claire was reminded of a time James told her why smart people sometimes lost at poker. They were too precious about playing their ace, he’d said. She wouldn’t be surprised if Lewis kept an entire second deck hidden up his sleeve, but Taylor’s problem was different. He always played his ace too early.

Her uncle stepped to Lewis “Listen, you -”

Claire stepped to her uncle. “I think that’s a good idea, actually. Maybe she would find Daddy. Maybe she could ask him whose fault it is he wound up there.”

Her uncle scoffed then swallowed. Taylor’s other problem was that he believed himself to be the only one at the table who could fucking play cards. He stuffed his handkerchief into his back pocket and pointed to the barn.

“Keep a tent in there.”

“Thanks,” Claire said.

“Yes, thank you,” said Lewis.

As Taylor turned to leave, she’d called out to him. “We’ll need a ride back.” She couldn’t carry the tent and Lewis if it came to that.

Taylor stopped without facing them and tilted his head to the sky a minute before answering. “Grahams are having a party for one of the girls tonight. I’ll be taking some melons over there in a minute.”

She and Lewis spent the ride between two piles of cantaloupe in the back of Taylor's Model T. None of them spoke until her uncle pulled off at the dirt road that led to Claire's house. As she and Lewis climbed out, Taylor said, "Hope it helps. The fresh air."

"I think it will," she told him, hiking the heavy canvas under her arm.

"You give this to your mama. From your aunt." He handed her a mason jar filled with peach jam that ambered in the high sun.

"Sure," she said.

Claire blew out a breath when Taylor finally sputtered around the bend.

"Come on," she said to Lewis. Through her old hole-ridden shoes, a pebble worked its way under her toe.

Lewis fell into limping step beside her, carrying the roll of chicken wire they didn't need. "Won't he ask your mother about me?"

She dropped the jam jar into the weeds. "No."

"Why not?"

"To ask her about you, he'd have to talk to her. That won't happen."

"She's his sister. They live in the same town."

"Brothers in my family can go a long time not talking to their sisters. You know that better than most I figure."

They walked in silence, birds swooping over them every now and then. With the pebble in Claire's shoe, she and Lewis had become a matching set.

"So, what he said about your dad..."

"He said a few things about my dad."

"About him being in Hooverville."

Claire kicked a rock into the brush. “Yeah, I really thought Taylor was going to punch you in your smart mouth.”

Lewis laughed and rolled his shoulders back. “Me too. I could’ve taken him, though, don’t worry.”

He’d gotten so pale he practically reflected the sun and he kept readjusting the flimsy weight of the chicken wire. He couldn’t have taken her uncle anywhere.

“So, you think your dad really is in Hooverville?”

“Why do you keep saying it like it’s one place?”

“I don’t...”

Claire stopped. “You know what a Hooverville is, Lewis.”

“Of course.”

She waited.

“It’s like your uncle said. There are hobos there.”

Claire kept walking. It wasn’t like she’d ever actually been. She’d seen newspapers butterflied open in front of men in town. She’d seen the headlines blaming ol’ President Herbert above photos of the tents and shanties.

She held a hand over her eyes to block the glare. “James didn’t tell you where our daddy is?”

Lewis shrugged. “He told me your dad wasn’t with you. Didn’t seem like something he wanted to talk about.”

She wasn’t sure there was such a thing. If there was, in her lifetime of knowing her brother, she’d never encountered it.

Or perhaps she had and hadn't recognized its face. Claire remembered evenings she and James spent on the floor beside the radio listening to a static-raspy Fibber McGee and Molly. When it finished, James would re-enact the best bits, practicing so he could do it for his friends later. She remembered her brother doubling as umpire and announcer for dirt-lot baseball games, often leaving with a busted cheek or a bruised rib owed to his flapping gums.

In the month or two before he took off, she'd noticed he stayed out longer, claiming there was a game she hadn't heard about. Their mom had been well past asking James where and how he spent those nights. Hell, she mostly spent them behind her closed door with oils rubbed on her forehead ignoring the sound of her moaning stomach.

Claire had watched him, though. Sure, their old radio was mostly for comedy shows and music, especially with their father no longer around to work his fingers over the piano. But she'd heard slow-growing murmurs of men in Europe and their ideas. How those ideas swept them up and made them hate. She saw the burn of these men in James's newfound eye glint. It was as if someone had taken her brother to a whetstone and filed his edge.

She wondered if Lewis knew that someone. If his edges had been filed too.

"Look, my uncle doesn't know shit, alright? About my daddy, about me, about anything."

"That's why he and your mom aren't speaking." He leaned forward to look at her.

"Mama doesn't know shit either," she said under her breath.

Not anymore, was what she didn't say. She sketched the letters against the canvas with her index finger.

"Your uncle mentioned sending your cousins over."

"Yeah?"

“Do you think he’ll do that?”

“I told him not to. You were there. You heard me.”

“You think he’ll listen to you?”

Claire hiked the tent up again. This boy had known her all of a few hours and knew nobody gave a rat’s ass what she said. Or maybe that’s how James had made her out. Maybe both. “Any reason you care?”

He sucked his teeth. He looked even more sallow now than he had at Taylor’s. “I think it would be best to keep to ourselves from now on.”

She pulled up. “What’s that mean?”

“James wouldn’t want them involved.”

“Want who?”

“Your family. Other people.”

“He said that?”

“He said to lay low. It’s very important.”

“What the hell is he up to that he doesn’t want anybody knowing about?”

It was what she’d tried to weasel out of Lewis before they’d left for Taylor’s. What was once again too complicated for Claire to understand, at least until they’d gotten their supplies and Lewis had gathered himself enough to explain it properly.

Just as Lewis opened his mouth, the low rumble of an automobile engine and the crunch of tires against the rocky path sounded behind them. It could have been her uncle coming to scratch an itching suspicion or her mother heading home early to strip Claire of her hide. Either way, she wasn’t going to stick around and risk someone putting a bullet through her last shot at finding James.

“Follow me.” She veered off the road into the woods. The pair disappeared into the shade.

CHAPTER SIX

ELI

Memorials were a trick Maggie taught him.

It always shocked Eli how easy it was. Granted, he'd had to try four memorials before he got a bite. The number of people he'd spoken to made his hands sweat, but at least it had paid off.

He could still hear Maggie talking him through the steps. They'd been in her basement apartment, listening to the Golden Girls bicker through the ceiling. Her ninety-year-old landlady liked reruns.

You slip into the big tent outside a church, paw through the raspberry cookies and pink lemonade, looking natural. Then you strike up a conversation with the guy who must have shit the bed at some point in life because he's sitting alone on a folding chair over by the garbage bin. Soon you know all about the kids he doesn't see and the wife he lost (this is his sister's memorial by the way) and all the good ole times he misses. At some point, he'll bring up the piles of junk he has lying around. All the stuff he needs to clear out of the attic. This person or that person has been hounding him to take care of it. You tell him, it's such a coincidence because you're actually writing a book and would love to do some research. He invites you to visit his home later that day. You gratefully accept.

That's how Eli found himself coughing into his elbow and wiping his nose on his sleeve in an elderly stranger's attic. The space was a dusty cave except for a window the size of a rabbit hole where the ceiling came to a point. It was stained glass, but a film of oily grime muted the color so the late-afternoon light that came in was mottled and faint.

Eli tried to make out the design. He thought it might be a flower. Or a face. The more he focused, the more it seemed to be a smattering of jagged shapes and not a picture at all.

It was the sort of window his mother would have loved. After Boston, she'd convinced Eli's father that the family needed church. She'd had Eli's father replace the window above the kitchen sink in Charleston with a stained-glass Virgin Mary.

Eli reached for the small flashlight he'd lifted from a gas station and fit it between his teeth. God, he missed having one on his phone. He missed his phone. He'd pocketed some cash from a cafe tip jar and used it to buy a burner, but the little flip phone hardly compared to what he was used to. He sniffed. At least the old man had offered him some painkillers.

Propped on his knees, Eli thumbed through a stack of photos stored in an old cookie tin. They were black and white, some stained and warped along the edges. A woman kneeling next to a cow at a fairground. A pale blonde girl holding a chicken to her chest while her mother scattered seed. A man in a ten-gallon hat standing outside a storefront, eyes on the sky like he knows it's up to no good.

Then there were the cornfields.

The attic belonged to an old man who'd worked as an agricultural agent in Monroe for a year during the Depression and had kept much of his records. Some photographs were taken from far out, the workers visible by their white wide-brim hats. Others were shot close, as if from the shadows of the stalks. In these, the faces of the field hands emerged from between the leaves like ghosts. The longer Eli looked, the more faces appeared.

He turned the photos over and traced the faded cursive writing he found on the back. *May 6, 1937*. Some had notes. Or maybe they were titles. *First light in the maze*.

Eli held these the longest. Reached out to them.

Nothing.

He pulled the flashlight from his mouth and pressed it to his forehead, breathing deep through his nose. This, of course, resulted in a fit of sneezing and coughing that washed clouds of dust into the air around him and did little to help the musty smell. Like newspaper brought in from a morning drizzle.

Eli sat back, his eyes watering. He scanned the light over the boxes he'd sorted and organized into stacks. He left some open, as if, like the men in the corn, a hidden Thread might eventually surface.

He tried a moth-eaten cardigan and engraved wine bottle. Then a letterman's jacket and christening gown. A baseball mitt with initials carved into the palm. A box of old perfume bottles. Nothing.

And then the light caught on a faded leather pouch. As soon as he eased it open, he felt a warm knot tying around his center. A camera. Eli gently drew out the accordion lens.

It was a risk, Eli knew. He could land anytime in 1937. He could miss his target by months and then he'd be back at square one without so much as the fucking internet to help him. But he'd already tried tugging at the Thread he'd ridden here, the now-torn tee-shirt on which he'd spilled the first sip of his father's beer at Willie's. The strand was so wobbly, he couldn't imagine it withstanding a return trip. The memory was so vague, frankly, it was a miracle he'd made it to the alley in as good a shape as he had.

He remembered the splitting sound as they'd all traveled, like ripping seams. The screaming. Something had gone wrong. Eli needed to get to them. He needed them to get home.

He leaned into the camera, sinking into the knot. But as he did, the cord let go, a rubber band's sudden release. He tried again, grabbing for the Thread as Maggie had taught him, but the camera was a car engine that, no matter how hard he turned the key, would not roar to life.

When the cord snapped back at him the third time, Eli threw the camera down. He stumbled down the ladder, tore through the old man's living room and out the front door without a word, even as the man called after him. He walked the sidewalks to a park near the old man's house until he reached a footbridge over a pond. There he stopped and looked over the edge, into the lazy green water.

Oh, yeah. That'll help for sure, he heard Maggie say and nearly laughed. It was what she said to him whenever he was hunched over a desk at his computer stress-planning a Guild job or wiping the day's stash of smartphones clean. She'd slide her arms around his shoulders from behind and lean her face into his neck.

On the bridge he closed his eyes. He could feel her. Her hot breath just above his collar. Her cool hands on his chest.

When he opened them, his little brother stared back through his murky reflection. Charlie hovered in each purpling bruise and his coarse mop of hair. His brother had come home more than once with his face beaten in by a dipshit at school who liked to call Charlie gay for the music he listened to. The second and last time this happened, Eli and a tire iron had paid the asswipe a visit.

Eli pushed off from the railing and made his way back to the old man's attic.

Soon, evening crept up on him and all he had to show for his efforts was an allergy flare and a shift from pain in his head to a sharpening twinge in his chest.

Below him, a kettle whistled followed by the knock of a closing cabinet. For a while now, Eli had thought Maggie and fate shared the same twisted sense of humor. Today, he was sure of it.

He stood, rolling out his stiff neck. He brushed off his jeans and scruffed up his hair before winding through the path back to the trap door. As he went, he dragged his hand along the boxes, raking his fingers.

Nothing hooked him. Nothing even reached back.

You can't compel them, Eli. They don't belong to you. Yet.

He dropped the flashlight into the pocket of his hoodie and descended the creaking ladder. The sound of the TV echoed down the narrow hall. A weatherman, warning of a coming storm.

As Eli headed for the living room, he stopped in the bedroom doorway. He'd already been through it once while the old man was in the bathroom. There was a photo of a woman and a teenager framed on the nightstand. It might have worked but it was too late judging by the fashion. 1960s.

Apart from the one picture, the room was free of personal touches. Muted floral comforter neatly tucked under the mattress. A small vanity with nothing on it. He wondered if this was where the old perfume bottles in the attic used to sit.

Eli slumped toward the kitchen, his stomach tightening. He didn't know what was in the tea the old man made. After he'd taken his first sip, he'd been too afraid to ask. It smelled like a compost bin and the bag bled a seaweed color, so he figured he was better off in the dark.

Since the first cup, Eli had tried to refuse the offering, but every hour the kettle sounded, and the man called him down from the attic. Only when Eli left after the camera incident had he evaded capture.

Now, a mug that read Best Coach sat steaming on the counter.

“Well, you find anything worth writing about?” The old man twisted from his spot on a weathered brown recliner and gazed up at Eli through thick glasses, a smile pressed into his sunken cheeks.

“Oh, yeah,” Eli told him. “You’ve got some treasures up there.”

The old man nodded. “Some treasures, yeah. Anything you think’ll work for the book?”

Eli pulled the burner out of his pocket. “Definitely. Took lots of pictures.”

“Oh, good. That’s good. Made you some tea there on the counter.”

Eli smiled. “I saw that. Thank you.”

He pulled out a stool at the bar. There were ginger snaps on a saucer next to the mug. He popped one into his mouth and hoped the sweet zing would distract his taste buds.

On TV, a woman emphatically flipped eggs in a non-stick pan, urging viewers to call now for a one-time-only deal. A number flashed on the screen.

“So you coming back tomorrow then, Howard?” the old man called over his shoulder.

Eli pushed the plate away. He didn’t even remember giving that name. At this point, Eli had been so many people it was hard to keep track. The genealogist searching for a lost grandparent. The historian curating an exhibit. The writer researching a novel. A companion. He never meant to become the last one but somehow it always happened.

When Eli first sat across from the old man at the memorial, he'd known this time would be no exception. The man was deflated from the inside. He'd mentioned a nurse who sometimes came to look out for him, but no one else.

Remembering the nurse had Eli climbing out of his seat. "Actually, I think I've gotten just about all I need. Can't thank you enough."

The woman in the commercial had brought on a guest. A too-tan man with too-white teeth swirling a crepe in the miracle pan.

"Sure, sure," the old man said.

Eli took a swig of the tea and swallowed it with a wince.

He couldn't say why he stopped. Why he asked the question. "Lot of photos up there."

"Hm?"

"I said you've got a lot of photos up there. Don't want any of them down here?"

The old man settled into the cushions. "Oh, no. No, I...no."

The man looked out the window. The day was cloudy, casting the living room in the same stale light as the attic. Eli had a feeling that the two of them weren't seeing the same sky, though. If he had to guess, the old man saw another time altogether.

The man said almost too quietly for Eli to hear, "Can't go back."

The man and woman in the commercial threw in another limited-time offer for a set of oven-mitts and a money-back warranty before the commercial faded to black. The channel ran a preview of the shows coming up that night. Gunsmoke and Bonanza at seven and eight. Little House marathon starting at nine.

"Don't want to," the old man murmured.

A key rattled the lock in the back door.

“Shit,” Eli whispered.

“Samuel?” A woman in scrubs, tennis shoes and braids backed into the room carrying a paper bag of groceries in each arm.

Eli crossed the short distance between him and the old man and laid a hand on his bony shoulder.

“All the best, Samuel.”

Samuel squeezed Eli’s hand. “You too, son. You still want to meet up at the park sometime for that chess match, right?”

“Sure.” Eli cleared his throat.

Samuel looked up at him and squeezed his hand again.

“I’m looking forward to it. You be sure to send me a copy of that book when it’s done.”

Eli looked up to see the nurse frozen in the kitchen, eyes trained on his hands. “Will do.”

“Who are you?” the nurse said. “Samuel, who is this?”

“Just a friend, Shelly.”

“How do you know him?”

As Eli moved for the door, Shelly moved for Samuel.

“Met him at the memorial. Howard, this is Shelly.”

Eli ducked his head as he closed the door behind him. “Nice to meet you.”

“Wait - ”

Smatterings of rain hit Eli’s face. Around him, branches swayed and leaves lapped like waves. He flipped his hood up, dug his hands into his pockets and headed down the short drive to the windy street.

At least now he knew why the Thread hadn’t worked.

It's the longing, really. It's the want that you grab onto.

As the rain began spitting in earnest, Eli made his way back to the bridge. He leaned against the rail and wondered how often Samuel had come to this same place.

Eli backed away from the edge.

Can't go back, Samuel had said.

But Eli could.

He would find the way.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CLAIRE

Claire had all but given up hope that she'd be back by dinnertime. Hell, if she made it home sometime this week it would be an act of God.

Her right arm twitched from the weight of the tent. She knew she'd feel it in her shoulders the next morning the way she did after loading a truck or hauling something up from the root cellar. James liked to say Claire was made like a bird.

A tweety little thing.

She told him to shut up, but she'd never shaken the feeling he might be right. She was made for flying, she was. She could feel that in her hollow bones, in every letter that looped through her mind's eye. Only problem was her wings had been clipped before she'd ever tasted the sky and her mother thought that meant Claire could be happy on the ground. It wasn't true, though. Even if Claire never made it a foot off the ground, she'd still lift her face to the swell of the sun. She'd still feel the air under her arms and hover, waiting to go.

Behind her, a branch snapped followed by a muffled "Pete's sake."

She swung her leg over a fallen tree.

"Watch your step here, Lewis," she called. She didn't think whoever had come to the house would follow them out here, but she'd high-tailed it anyhow. Or tried to. A sigh sounded behind her. Not long after, she heard tearing fabric and a hushed "Shit."

She pressed her quivering lips together. If James had been here, they'd be a giggling, snorting mess listening to this poor sort-of-Yankee fumble through the woods behind them. They'd have come up with half a dozen nicknames for him by now which they'd be too impressed with not to share with Lewis.

Claire kept trying to imagine the two of them together, James and Lewis. She pictured Lewis's slick grin and watchful gaze against her brother's lip-splitting smile and fierce stare. James drew people to him like a porch light. She hadn't met many who could resist him. Even the schoolteachers he made into fools couldn't help but feel honored. The way she'd heard Lewis's brain working all day made her think maybe the pair saw each other as puzzles worthy of their skill. Finally, a challenge.

Lewis certainly was that. The boy had more than an ace or two hidden up his sleeve. She caught him clapping his hand against his back pocket every now and again, feeling for that envelope. And there was a moment right before they'd left for Taylor's. Lewis had dozed off into his hand, elbow propped on the table. When she'd poked him, he'd jumped upon waking.

"Hell's sake. It's me."

He'd blinked at her. "Claire."

He still wasn't seeing her. "Expecting someone else?"

"No," he said. "I was dreaming. I was just dreaming."

Now behind her, he seemed still half in a dream. That or he was aiming for every twig in his path.

"How much farther to town?" he asked.

"We're not going to town." she said, ducking under a branch.

"I thought that was the plan."

"Never said that."

"You said you needed supplies."

"That's why we went to Taylor's."

Lewis released a deep breath. "But there is a town."

She paused midstep. "Of course."

"And a train stops there."

"Didn't you come on the train?"

"I - no. On a bus."

"Right," she said.

He sighed again. A shoe scraped against stone. "Mother-"

"Okay," she called. They couldn't be more than thirty yards from her house but it would have to be good enough. Any farther and he'd twist the other ankle and she'd have to carry him to James on her back.

She dropped the tent on the ground and stretched out her arm. When she pointed her finger to the spot beside her, the muscles in her hand shook.

Little bird.

"Find some rocks to beat the stakes in."

He limped to where she stood and dropped the chicken wire. The dappled shade of the woods fluttered on his sallow skin, darkening the hollows of his cheeks. She caught sight of a fresh rip in his already ruined pants. She'd have to find him another pair somehow.

"What are we doing, Claire?" Stray sunrays caught a few chestnut strands in his otherwise oil-black hair, now coiled and curled.

"You'll stay here until you're well enough to take me to James." She began slinging stray sticks into the brush.

He scowled at her. "I see."

She shook out the canvas until it lay flat on the ground. "What did you think the tent was for? Hand me that."

He bent down, hovering his bad ankle off the ground as he did. He picked up the stake but didn't pass it to her, instead he turned it over with his fingers.

Maybe it was seeing her Uncle, or missing her brother, or that a somewhat hapless and observant boy had fallen from sky and into her lap, but Claire felt a bit more vinegary than usual. "Lewis, here's the thing. You like your head and your neck and whatever you've got below your belt, right?"

He blinked. "I do, yes."

"Right. That means you can't stay at my house. Not if you want to keep all those things where they're at." Claire searched the ground for a rock.

"Are you planning to relocate them?"

Her neck warmed. "My mama will if she finds you asleep in our kitchen."

Lewis scratched his chest and left a green-brown stain behind. He must've planted his hand in mud one of the times he'd slipped. "She's a pretty tough lady, huh?"

Claire cleared her throat. "You could say that. Look, the worst you'll see out here are coyotes, but they're not after you. Make enough noise and they'll leave you alone. Don't bring any food back with you and you shouldn't have to worry about raccoons either."

She dusted her hands off on her thighs. "And watch out for the poison ivy. That's the last thing you need. You know what poison ivy looks like..."

Lewis's face turned like sour milk. "This is a bad idea."

"It's just until your ankle feels better. Then we'll go after James."

He watched her for a second, in a way that reminded her of her father plucking an especially quick set of notes on the keys. Then his face cleared. "Tell me more about her. Your mother."

“She’s like you said. Tough.”

He nodded. “I guess you’d have to be. To be a mother right now.”

She palmed a smooth-faced stone and thought of the mother who’d taught her to make soap. The one who’d held Claire after she’d upset a wasp nest and her daddy had to dig out the stingers. She thought of fingers combing through her wet hair after a swim in Taylor’s pond.

She thought of her mother’s hands now, chapped from overwork and the hard set of her lips as she counted money at the kitchen table. “I guess.”

“Must be why you’re the way you are.”

“How’s that?”

“Determined,” he said. “James used to tell me that about you. Now I see what he meant.”

Little bird.

Lewis approached her. “Claire, I need a favor. I need you to take me to town. Tonight.”

Claire’s knuckles whitened around the stone. Again, she wished for the shotgun above the door at home. She thought of her mother cleaning it after dinner. A while back, one of Taylor’s field hands had gotten a bit too friendly with Mama and wound up with a bloody nose and a black and blue ego for his trouble. Only, he’d told her she’d be sorry and Mama spent the next week or so worth of nights sat on a kitchen chair with the gun on her lap. Somehow or other, Taylor found out and had the man run out of Tilly. But those nights when her mother had been all that stood between Claire and a dangerous man had been the safest she’d felt.

“Why?”

“I can’t explain completely. It’s -

“Complicated.”

Whatever softness had found his face while they talked about Claire's mother drained away. "Yes. You're going to have to trust me."

Be brave, Looney.

"Thing is, Lewis, I don't trust you. And maybe that's because I don't know you or because I know you're not telling me shit and the shit you're telling me doesn't make sense. So, here's what's going to happen. I'm *not* going to take you to town at *night* seeing as you can't hardly stay upright and *you* are going to explain to me *exactly* how it is you know my brother. *Then* you're going to tell me what the hell you need in town and then *maybe* you and me can work out a place for you to stay that's not the woods."

For a while Lewis stood there and Claire stood across from him. A woodpecker tapped against a nearby trunk.

"He calls you Looney. James does."

"Yeah."

"He never told me why."

"Clair de Lune. It's a song on the piano."

His eyebrows lifted. "I know it." Lewis made a show of sitting down, softly cursing as he arranged his ankle. "Well, Looney, you'd better get comfortable."

She angled her legs to the side and sat, wishing she'd changed into pants. "I can't hardly wait," she muttered.

Lewis shook his head at the sky. "All right, Claire. Tell me what you think you know about time."

CHAPTER EIGHT

ELI

The rain continued into the evening, further proof to Eli of luck's ongoing resentment.

Sun showers had been his brother's favorite when they were kids. They'd go into the street and kick puddles, spread their arms wide and catch pecks of rain on their tongues. Now, each drop needled him, drummed against his hood like impatient fingers.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been walking when he stumbled on the library. It looked the same, he thought, but with twelve years less wear. The letters above the front door hadn't yet begun to rust. The cement outside hadn't yet cracked. Still, the building was squat and brick and the place he knew.

Eli opened the door and cool A/C gusted him, as it had that day.

The day after he'd met Maggie, he'd been roaming the stacks, lifting wallets from handbags old ladies left on tables as they browsed for their next cozy mystery or cheating husband thriller. It was easy work. Something to keep him loose and to keep him from re-seeing his mother slumped through the Impala's windshield.

He'd just passed the W's and was prepping for his exit when one of the librarians stepped into his path at the end of the shelf.

"Are you finding everything okay?" she'd asked.

He really must be losing his edge, he'd thought. Twice in two days he'd been stopped. Only this lady had muddy brown eyes behind her tortoiseshell glass that couldn't hold a candle to Maggie's cerulean. Also he'd felt pretty sure this woman had no intention of giving him her number.

“I’m all right but thank you,” he’d said, flashing a smile at her.

But when he turned around, another librarian appeared.

“What are you looking for? I’d love to help you pick something.” The man had six inches and at least fifty pounds on Eli, all wrapped in a sweater vest and cardigan. The librarian sauntered closer until his loafers were toe to toe with Eli’s Converse.

“Long week, not sure I have the brain power for reading, you know? I’m heading over to the DVDs.”

He tried to sidestep, but the man matched Eli’s stride. Eli’s head had been an echo chamber of “shit” and “fuck”, but none of that reached his face. Criminals panic, his father had told him once. Don’t panic.

“I totally understand. Hey, do you know about our streaming services?” the librarian asked.

“No.”

“You can stream movies for free with your library card.”

“Oh, that’s great. I’ll look into it.”

“Why don’t you give me your card and I’ll help get you set up?” The librarian held his hand out to Eli.

“I’m pretty tech savvy, I’ll figure it out.”

“Oh, come on, it’s what I’m here for.”

“I’m good, thanks.”

And then there’d been an officer lumbering over to them, red-cheeked and puffing. “This him?”

The librarian smiled down at Eli. “Sure is.”

That's how Eli came to spend an afternoon in the Charleston County Sheriff's Office. He'd never been booked before, not even as a younger, dumber greenhorn. How he'd managed to be caught picking pockets at the library was beyond him. At least, he'd pretended it was. Truth be told, he'd begun to linger, giving the mark or maybe the universe one last chance to catch him out. The mark or the universe had finally taken him up on the offer.

Maggie had been the only person he could call. The Mikes would have had a coronary and his brother had been out of the question. The kid was in the middle of ACT prep and, anyway, Eli couldn't have faced Charlie like this.

He hadn't realized that he didn't expect her to show up until an officer shouted his name into the bullpen. And there she'd been in the waiting area, the same charcoal smudged eyelids like smoke around crystal balls.

And she'd laughed. Not her laugh. Sure, it was warm, but her mouth hardly moved and her eyes stayed at a dull smolder. Soon he'd know her laugh wild, her eyes in flame.

"Eli, huh?"

"Yeah. Maggie."

She bobbed her head at him. "I had a feeling about you, Eli." She turned on her heel. "You coming?"

He'd hesitated, once again tempting the mark, the universe, to catch him in the act. What he hadn't understood as he followed Maggie into the street was that he was the worse con of the two and he'd once again been caught.

He took her back to his apartment. His mother had always gone on about how he needed more decorations. Pictures. Paintings. A throw blanket. So it looks like someone lives here, she'd

say whenever she visited. He'd never taken her advice, but seeing the place through Maggie's eyes, it looked like a stock image. Everything was gray.

Maggie roamed around the living room, grazing. She plopped her russet messenger bag on his couch. Eli noticed the blinds were down and went to open them.

"I don't mind the dark," she'd said. She found the milk crate of records in the corner and walked her fingers through them. Most he'd stolen from Pack Rat. He was pretty sure his brother had slipped a few from the stash since moving in. Probably made him feel cool and vintage.

"Just didn't want you to think I'm the kind of guy who sits in his apartment with the blinds closed."

She turned over his Smiths record, skimming her finger over the track list.

Eli ducked into the kitchen and then into the fridge. "You want something to drink?" He like to say Charlie was the reason he hadn't had a girl here in so long, but that barely skimmed the truth. He didn't want to talk about his dead parents. He didn't want to talk about anything else.

He'd been checking the sell by on a carton of lemonade when she said, "Why do you have these?"

"What?" He stood up to find her holding a pair of leather wallets, the end table drawer open beside her. One wallet was cherry with a Scottish thistle branded on its face and the other was black and frayed at the edges. Both were wrinkled and cracked from use. Both were limp and empty.

"These."

"Oh. Souvenirs, I guess."

She watched him, one eyebrow cocked.

“Did you want something to drink? I have lemonade.”

“No.” She looked down at the wallets, one in each hand. “Thank you.”

Eli slid his hands in his pockets and leaned against the sink. One of the newer Mikes dabbled in street magic. One night, after a particularly good day of work, the pair had gotten drunk and Mike had done trick after trick for Eli, teaching him to watch for the moment when his mind made excuses for his eyes. That’s how Eli had felt with Maggie that day. As though he’d been waiting to spot a handkerchief tail poking from her sleeve.

“Why did you keep these and not the others?” she asked.

“The others?”

“The others you stole when you stole these.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “How do you know they’re stolen?”

She met his eyes. “You lifted eight wallets today. I imagine on the day you stole these, you had quite a few to choose from. Why these?”

The night the men came to his house on the wharf, he’d cried until morning. His father had paced the house, smoking his way through a pack of cigarettes while his mother held Eli in her crowded, pregnant lap. She’d rocked him on the kitchen floor, her lips in his hair, telling him he was okay now. Her sweet boy, he would be okay. When the first buttery rays of the morning peeked through the lace curtains, the tears stopped. After that, Eli couldn’t remember a time he’d been truly afraid. It was as if he’d spent his lifetime supply of fear in one night and his body had nothing more to give.

So, while he never quite feared that the strange woman with the strange questions might be a threat to him, he was beginning to wonder if he had made the right decision inviting her into his apartment. His brother’s apartment.

“They’re nice,” he said.

She’d rolled her eyes. “And?”

“Why does it matter?”

She tossed the wallets onto the couch and turned toward the closed windows.

“Listen, thanks for today -”

“I have this feeling about you, Eli.”

A cold thrill ran up his back. “Yeah?”

“It’s kind of like the feeling you had with the wallets but stronger.”

He swiped a hand down his cheek. “You really need to get over the wallets.”

Maggie turned back to face him. “I will as soon as you tell me why you picked them.”

Later he would tell her that her recruitment approach needed a little finesse. She could be a bit forceful, he’d say. She would not appreciate the critique.

“It was a while ago,” he told her.

“But you remember.”

“Not really.”

“Tell me.” There had been an intensity about her that cast quiet over them like down. The only sound was the bass of the neighbor’s music above them and the rattly hum of the A/C.

“I…”

“Yes?”

He couldn’t believe he was entertaining this. Out loud. “It’s like a pull. Like they’re pulling on me.” Eli pointed to his sternum. “Here.”

She’d nodded at him, urging him on.

“It’s kind of an itch, too. It doesn’t happen all the time. Usually it doesn’t, but when it does, I have a hard time letting go. Dad used to say I was a klepto.”

“People say the same thing about me.” She smiled. “I think they’re probably right.”

She grabbed one of the wallets, the one with the Scottish thistle, off the couch and slung the messenger bag over her shoulder.

“Are you leaving?”

“We are,” she said. “But we’ll be back.”

She’d approached him until they were a breath away from each other. She held out her hand. “You can trust me, Eli.”

He hadn’t been sure about that. Actually, he’d been fairly unsure about it.

The moment he interlaced their fingers, she squeezed. “Don’t let go.”

“What are you -”

“Trust me.” She closed her eyes. “Don’t let go.”

Slow warmth snaked his wrists. It writhed over him, a burning chain. And then there was the draw. As if he stood before an open doorway, a dare dangled in front of him. As if he hovered over a ledge, one step from the drop.

“Lean in.” Her voice had become honey, coating him.

“I don’t -”

“Lean in,” she said. “Fall.”

Around him, the edges of his apartment blurred. Shafts of light and shadow spun up his arms, a kaleidoscope of slurred charcoal and gold.

He had to be high. She’d slipped him something. That or he was losing it and she was a vision. He was dead and she was -

“Eli.” His name echoed as if spoken inside him.

The cords tugged him forward. He planted his feet.

“Trust me,” she whispered.

Later, he would say he was tired. That he was a klepto and Maggie was too strong to resist. This was not true, but hardly matters now, for on that day, when the cords strained a second time, Eli gave in. The second time, he fell.

Through liquid amber. Sound muted, his ears ready to pop. Burnished lightning bugs churned; a swirling haze through which Maggie was his tether, the center of the storm. Her breath filled his chest, her pulse strummed his skin.

Her eyes opened, pierced him with blue. Slowly the cords uncoiled and the warmth retreated, replaced by cold nipping his fingertips. Fat snowflakes spilled from the sky and caught his lashes. Maggie released him and stepped back. When she did, he saw past her, around her.

They were in a field, the tall grass a mossy green over the rolling hills. In the distance, a line of wooden fence posts was strung together by wire along a gravel road. Across it stood a building patched up in stone, steam pouring out from the chimney.

He must have been high. Or dead.

“Eli.” Maggie’s voice was small. “I want you to tell me everything you think you know about time.”

Eli staggering one step before his knees buckled beneath him and he plunged into darkness deeper than sleep.

CHAPTER NINE

CLAIRE

“Well?” said Lewis, waiting.

Claire was busy thinking she needed a bath and a pair of pants. She was thinking that, when she saw her mother again, the woman would either lay into Claire until the tell-tale vein popped out of her forehead or say nothing at all so they both went on simmering with unspent tension. Claire hadn’t worked out which she was hoping for.

She was thinking about what shape the sweat soaking her underarms would stain into her dress and how an owl must have moved into the squirrel nest in the tree beside them because there were a few long reddish feathers that hadn’t been there yesterday.

Mostly she was thinking how swell it would be if her brother would jump out of a bush laughing his fool head off. If he’d tell her how gullible she was to believe he’d send her such a lunatic.

That did not happen, of course. Instead, Lewis and Claire sat there as gnats clouded above them.

“You probably think I’m crazy,” he said, picking the tuft off a dandelion.

She should. He was beginning to sound, as some in Tilly would have put it, like a raving imbecile.

“Time,” she said. “Like clocks?”

“No. I mean, sure, but more than that. I’m talking about how time works.”

“So...clocks.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “No. You know how we usually think about time like past, present, and future? Like they’re separate?”

As he spoke, he took a stick and drew three lines.

“They are separate, Lewis.”

“But what if they weren’t?”

“Weren’t what?”

“Separate. Or at least, they didn’t have to be.”

She swatted a gnat from her ear. “I don’t know what this has to do with my brother.”

“I’m getting there. You know how to sew right? I saw needles in your room.”

One still sat in her pocket. “Sure.”

“Well, you know how fabric is held together by threads? And those threads are made up of smaller threads which are made up of even smaller threads?”

“Yeah.”

He started drawing smaller, lighter lines in the dirt between the main three, connecting them. “What if time was like a shirt, made up of all these strands that hold past, present, future together. What if, to travel from one to the next, all we had to do was pull the right thread.”

She shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

Lewis squared his shoulders. “What if it were possible, Claire. What if *I* could do it.”

Her mind went back to the game of tag in Taylor’s barn, to her legs kicking out under her. “I don’t understand.”

“What if James could do it, too.”

He put the stick down and leaned his elbows onto his crossed knees. “What if he took the wrong thread by accident and needed help to get back.”

In the summer he and Claire drank their first dawn on Sutter Hill, James began sleeping on the back porch. He told her he rested better outside. There was more space for his wandering

mind. In the mornings, he'd tell her how the fireflies flickered in the bushes, the chirping crickets, the growls of faraway thunder. Sometimes she heard him humming to himself, a song their father liked to play or something by Arthur Tracy. Usually it was just the humming, but on nights when he sang to the dark, he left not one lonely space in the sky. His voice alone shimmered the stars.

We're going. Anywhere. I found a way.

"Say something." Lewis spoke softly.

She rose and marched toward the house.

"Claire?"

She shook her head. "No."

There was no vehicle there when she got back to the house. No sign of anyone around. Perhaps she'd imagined the engine earlier. Perhaps *she* was the raving imbecile and really had imagined all of this. She stormed past the chicken coop, ignoring the hens' flapping outrage as she plowed through them.

Inside, Claire paced the kitchen floor. Merl watched her from his perch on the windowsill, tail flicking.

"Well quit looking at me, all right? Don't you think I know?"

She went to her room. *King Arthur and His Knights* laid where Lewis had left it that morning. Not far from where James had left it months before, when he'd asked her to come with him. Anywhere.

She swiped a hand over her forehead and sat on the bed, leaning her elbows onto her knees. It was nonsense. The stuff of every story James had ever spun up and read to her when they'd run out of books.

Claire crossed the room to the dresser and wedged the bottom drawer open. Part of her hoped her mother had lied and Claire would find the typewriter inside where she'd left it. But the drawer was hollow save for the stack of paper at the bottom lined with the words James had written by moonlight, the clacking keys an unsteady metronome to his nighttime serenades on the sleeping porch.

She thumbed through the pages, brushing her fingers over the places where the ink had smudged or new letters had typed over her brother's mistakes. James wrote as though he was racing, the lines short and pointed. To read him was to run downhill.

When he'd lived there, he'd kept his work in the drawer's false bottom until he was ready to show Claire, forbidding her to look before the right moment. It was a test of sorts, Claire knew, and one she always passed. Now, the false bottom held her own secrets.

It started when she'd written a poem about peach orchards for school. She hadn't thought anything of it, really. Peach orchards were peach orchards, after all. Her teacher liked it though, and told Claire that she had a talent. She'd almost shown the poem to James more than once, each time folding the page at the last minute and tucking it back into her Bible where she hid most things worth keeping.

Then James was gone and her mother told Claire that school took too much time that could be money and bubbles of heat began to grow in Claire's belly. But she still had the typewriter to spend her own nights writing, taking the words that caught her mind, that her fingers traced, and planting them on the page.

Her stories weren't like her brothers. There were no great men and very few quests. More often there were fields and girls who crossed them. There were horizons chased and answers found. They were quiet, her tales. But Claire heard them.

The screen door whined and a soft knock sounded. She placed James's work on top of her own and slid the drawer closed before standing.

Another knock, a bit stronger this time, echoed through the house.

Once, when she was six, Claire found a snake in the cabbages and cried out for her brother. James had run up in his overalls and too-big gloves asking her what was wrong. When she'd shown him the snake, he'd sagged into himself. He knelt down beside her and showed her the rounded head and smooth black of the snake's body.

Ever see a pointed head and a pattern, you yell. Hear a rattle, you yell. I'll come get him. But, you see another guy like this, you leave him to his business. He's trying to help.

Even if she yelled now, nobody would come to get Lewis.

In the kitchen, Claire swung a chair out from the table, climbed onto it and eased the shotgun from its hooks above the door. She checked to see it was loaded before she climbed down. Back straight, she tucked the butt of the gun under her arm and opened the door. When Lewis saw her, he stumbled off the porch.

"Wait, wait, wait, Claire - "

"You said you could get to where you want to in time by pulling the right thread."

"I - yeah."

She followed him into the yard. "You might be crazy, Lewis. You certainly talk like you are."

He glanced left and right. The chickens kept up their clucking, oblivious to his fear.

"But I guess I'm a little crazy too because I'm going to trust you."

A laugh jumped out of him. "It looks like you trust me." He nodded to the gun.

She shifted her grip. Claire didn't have any money. But if she did, she'd put it on Lewis being a garden snake. That didn't mean she was in the market for unnecessary chances. "You're going to take me to my brother," she said.

Lewis studied her. "Of course. I'll do everything I can."

She held out a hand. As they shook on it, a soft fever bloomed in her stomach, drawing her towards him. She shook him off and turned back to the house. "Come on then. Sounds like we've got some work to do."

As she led Lewis up the porch steps, she was reminded of the last thing James had said before leaving her with the vegetables that day years ago.

Be sure you keep away from the garden snakes, Looney. They might not have the poison to kill you, but they've still got teeth to bite.

CHAPTER TEN

ELI

He shouldn't be here.

The thought cracked whiplike in Eli's mind whenever he dared one step closer to the gate, each time sending him one step back.

Had Maggie been there with him, she would have nailed his ass to the wall over how close he'd already gotten to the blue cottage. She would have seen him mooning at the plastic flamingos staked down the driveway and told him if he didn't get the hell away from that place he'd be sleeping on the lawn until the next apocalypse, at which point she'd use his body as a shield against whatever horrors befell them.

But Maggie wasn't there, and missing her had grown on him like ivy, so much that he could hardly spot his skin between the vines.

From inside the house, a tinny bass shivered the windows. Eli's mother would be playing U2 on a stereo in the kitchen as she slathered ketchup over a bread pan of meatloaf. Eli's father would have his head tipped back on a couch cushion, catching flies in his open mouth as he napped in his damp bathing suit like Eli's mother had specifically asked him not to. And eleven-year-old Eli would be sitting on the guest room floor building Legos or people-watching through the parted seashell curtains.

Old Eli, mosquito-bitten, rain-sodden Eli, ducked behind a palm tree.

It was one of the first things Maggie had told him when he'd woken up in a Scottish bed and breakfast circa 1999 after the wallet stunt.

"Everything you touch," she'd said, her legs criss crossed at the foot of a four-poster.
"Everything you touch, you change. Every word you say, every person you meet you risk

altering. Maybe it will be important, maybe it won't. Safest bet is to touch as little as possible and say only what you have to. And never talk to your past self. Ever."

This had been after hours of his head in the toilet breathing through nausea. After two cups of ginger tea and Maggie telling him his reaction was very normal. After waggling the thistle wallet at him and knotting his brain with talk of Threads.

He'd been halfway through a plan to rush the door when she placed a hand on his calf. Her wrist was wrapped in mismatched glass beaded bracelets.

"Eli, I know okay? I know. But I also know that you're going to come around. You're too curious to let this go and if you don't stick with me, I have a feeling you'll make a real mess. So let me help you. Let me *show* you. The guy I work with - calls his group The Guild." She paused at the face Eli pulled. "Yeah, you get used to it. The point is, he's not so different from the guys you work with. Likes the sound of his own voice, but you know how it is."

He'd scoffed at her but she squeezed his leg. "He can sort this stuff out with the cops. The guy's been at this less than a year and he's already got all sorts of contacts."

Eli had thought about that at the Sheriff's department. He couldn't leave Charlie alone, even for a short jail stint.

Another squeeze. "You're bored," Maggie said. "I barely know you and I can see that. Why not see where this could take you? Why not trust me a little while longer?"

He had, eventually. Trusted her. And she had trusted him right up until the day he'd lost her.

Across the street from his childhood home, a couple walked along the road shoulder holding hands. The man lifted his farmer's tanned arm and brought the woman's knuckles to his mouth for a kiss without looking at her, without pausing his stroll. The woman brushed her free

hand along the man's stomach before fixing her glasses and wondering aloud where she might find a new pair. These were so heavy on her nose. They were giving her a headache.

Eli spun to the other side of the tree and started for the side door. Now that the sun was out, sweat dewed at his hairline, beading into his eyes. His mom kept an emergency key in a ziplocked box she wedged in one of the gutters. Eli's father had started his share of screaming matches over how stupid this hiding spot was and who should not be cried to when the gutters clogged and fucked up the drainage.

These exchanges usually ended with Eli's mom smoking a blunt on the porch and Eli's father cracking a Bud Light or three in the recliner while Eli and his brother played Crazy 8's on the coffee table.

He snapped open the step ladder his mom kept for this very purpose and slipped his fingers through sludge until he found the box. Inside the garage, his father's car once again stared back at him, DOLEN license plate and all. The windshield was spider-veined. Eli remembered a rock from a gravel truck had popped up and cracked it on a drive to the beach. He remembered his father pounding the heel of his hand against the steering wheel while his mother rubbed her temples.

Beside the car was a bin of his brother's wiffle bats and his father's aluminum ones. After their father died, Eli's brother gave up the sport. Frankly, Eli had been sort of relieved. The kid was kind of a clutz. Eli was always worried he'd trip and skid his face off running to first base.

Eli gripped one of the bats that wasn't plastic. What would happen, he wondered not for the first time, if he beat in the Impala's fender. If he popped the hood and ripped every hose and wire in the engine. If there was no car, his parents couldn't be inside it when it crashed. If there

was no car, he wouldn't have to resist telling his mother, the closest she'd ever be to him again, that in twelve years when his father asked her to go for an afternoon drive, she should say no.

He'd tried to explain such an idea to Maggie. He didn't have to speak to them. There were ways around such obvious intervention. Weren't they making a living proving just that?

And what if you don't meet me? What if you never walk into the record store? What if you never get arrested and you never call me?

The door to the house swung open and Eli dropped behind the car's hood. He could tell it was his mom by the clunk of her shoes. She'd always insisted on wearing chunky faux-wood wedges, even if they were flimsy and threatened to turn one of her ankles when she rushed around like she did. Eli heard the snick of her heels and the snap of the chest freezer opening. He rose up far enough to see her.

Her hair was clipped up and frizzy, pieces falling over her ears and curling down her neck. As she rummaged through packages of frozen hotdogs and meals left over from her most recent diet plan, she hummed, swaying her head from one side to the other.

Where the Streets Have No Name. Bono's near-rasp sang along from the stereo inside.

Right then, the sky could not see Eli, and the stars would sleep hours still. Yet, if he had looked through the small windows of the garage door, he might have seen the clouds gauze over the sun. Might have watched blue pale the way eyes fall when there is nothing left to say.

Eli did not look out, however. Instead, he remembered a trite phrase he'd heard once from that asshole Lance from the Guild. The kid seemed barely old enough to drive and there he was rattling cliches like a knock-off Hallmark card.

There are choices we make and ones that make us, he'd told his room of acolytes at Eli's first meeting in a bar stock room, surrounded by cases of beer and the scent of sweating sycophants.

Then, Eli hadn't bought a word. But knelt beside his father's cursed car, feet from the mother he'd buried, Eli felt the cliché slot into place as it must have for Lance, for all those who heard those words strung together for the first time. And, as sometimes happens, Eli understood why the phrase had become old and worn, like shoes tread too far. Because once it had been a discovery.

What if you never meet me?

As his mother hurried up the steps through the door, mumble-singing about wanting to run and hide, strands of hair floating limp as willow leaves, Eli discovered himself, remade in the decision to watch her go.

When she was gone, the sound of her music once again muffled and the garage once again empty, Eli crossed to where his father's ancient bag of even more ancient golf clubs hung from a rack on the wall. From the bag, he pulled a monogrammed towel his mother had given his father for Christmas one year. His father had been terrible at golf and so had Eli. Still, they went out together every summer, sharing the clubs his father had bought from a yard sale. The last time Eli had seen this towel, it had been in a shoebox of mementos he kept in his closet.

He'd never tried anything like this before and had no reason to think such a stunt wouldn't land him stranded in the haphazardly sewn fabric of time cursing himself until he unraveled. But he'd decided back at the library that, if he was going to fix what he'd done, he'd need the kind of help he could only find in his own time.

Through the door, he heard his mother's shouting and his father's exasperated response. Eli bet she'd just found him soaking the couch.

He gripped the towel, allowing the strands to simmer and weave through him. They worked sluggishly, as though they wondered if he might change his mind and follow the other, stronger pull drawing him toward the house. Eli took one step then another, away from the door, the car, until his back pressed against the cool concrete wall. There, the strings twined him, dragged him into the squall.

Before the light overtook him, the door to the house cracked open once more. In that opening, stood a small boy with coils of hair aiming in all directions. Again, Eli did not see. Did not hear his brother call out, frightened by the strange, battered man with watering eyes in the garage. He did not see shock slacken the little boy's face as that man winked out of existence.