WHAT THE GRAMOPHONE LISTENER WANTS TO HEAR

by

GABRIELLE HOVENDON

(Under the Direction of Andrew Zawacki)

ABSTRACT

What the Gramophone Listener Wants to Hear is a collection of short prose, including stories, hybrid works, and a lyric essay. The individual works are united by a common interest in the creative arts: painting, woodworking, classical music, documentary filmmaking, and more. Each work in the collection also investigates the conditions for and results of a creative life. With varying points of view, styles, and structures, the works examine writer's block and the struggle for inspiration, the unglamorous loneliness of artistic endeavors, the difficulty of striking a balance between creative work and companionship, the role of public art in political crises, and the conflicts inherent to collaboration.

INDEX WORDS: Creative writing, Literary fiction, Short story

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CHAPTER 1

GLORIOUS ORKESTER FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF HUMANKIND

We'd had some notable disasters. This was true. There'd been the incident with the electrical fire. The opening night stop-and-start-over. There'd been so many dropped cymbals and broken strings that we were starting to wonder if we'd been cursed.

We didn't look like much. We had garlic breath and receding hairlines. We were fluent in the language of budgetary woes. We performed in a concert hall like a shoebox crossed with an oven, and we sometimes got paid in beer.

We were undignified. See also: ignominious, unprepossessing, asthmatic, spasmodic, and disagreeable. We fought over who would give music lessons to the town's few mumbling and wooden-eared children. We cursed in our most eloquent dialects about our concert wear. We were from the most backwards parts of our country, and we did not necessarily have poetic sensibilities. We were the Orkester Ljutmera: forty strings, eighteen woodwinds, sundry brass and percussion, and me, the principal cellist.

We had our moments, though. On our less belligerent days, Gregorius would even admit as much. When you got us on stage together, we sometimes fit like gears and cogs. We sometimes played like we were sharing the same brain. We had a muscular, sinewy sound. With concertinas we were single-minded and prismatic. With symphonies we employed both depth and breadth. Our tones and timbres were well balanced, subtle, and refreshing. We crescendoed like we were twice our size. The Orkester Ljutmera was the only orchestra for 300 miles that could reliably get you on the edge of your seat, and even the state—our raging, dysfunctional state—was starting to notice.

#

It was May, the beginning of another performance season. No one knew what was happening around us. Was it rubber bullets, smoke bombs, propaganda campaigns? Were people being detained or tortured? Were there, as rumored, secret resistance movements organizing in the mountains? These days, even the best-case scenario seemed to be *shit out of luck*.

Lately, Gregorius had been responding to external pressures with increasingly complex symphonies. We couldn't tell if he was trying to take our mind off things or just preparing us for challenges ahead. When I'd asked, he'd shaken a newspaper in my face and shouted, Katya, not everything revolves around you.

We had a real hellish lineup this year, some legendarily difficult pieces like *Mathis Der Maler* and Mozart's No. 40. We had a little bit of Schoenberg, a little bit of Webern, a little bit of all those atonal fucks. We had Bartok's *Concerto for Orchestra and Miraculous Mandarin*, which made us feel neither miraculous nor, most days, orchestral.

Our first day of rehearsal, the principal clarinetist came in excited. He'd found an unopened box of reeds, and he wouldn't answer Gregorius's questions when he asked where they came from. The trombones had started taking apart the euphonium player's chair.

You assholes! Gregorius would shout. Don't you know you're the cellos of the brass section? Act with a little dignity!

Which, seeing as who the actual cello section was, didn't help much.

We managed to warm up without incident, and then we started in on the Bartok. It sounded like something caught in a thresher. The trumpets came in three bars too late. The violins were just making up the notes. The goddamn violas couldn't get anything right.

I started counting aloud from my seat. I wasn't big on hiding my frustrations. In my opinion, if you weren't good enough to stay on tempo, you weren't good enough to not get your feelings hurt.

Gregorius stopped and restarted us. A few of the violins had the good graces to keep their instruments in their lap. The trumpets made their entrance in time. The principal clarinet maundered on. The sound began to approach something like a concerto.

Then a viola missed her cue. Another toppled unharmonically after her. It was like the fucking lemmings all over the cliff. I flung my bow at them and stormed offstage.

Don't just go to the bar, Katya, Gregorius shouted.

I wasn't going to, I screamed back, and then I went anyway.

The political situation in our country was what Gregorius called *less than ideal*. The majority party had changed so many times that no one knew who was on top anymore. Some of the bureaucrats were being paid in bus passes. No one had been granted an exit visa in years. In the capital city, the conservatives were ordering prostitutes, the moderates were hiding in their offices, and the radicals were setting off rockets in Constitution Square.

Everyone was in a near-constant state of aggression. Neighbors threw stones through windows. Shopkeepers had fistfights with customers. Restaurants had begun adding broken-plate surcharges to their menus. You couldn't trust your butcher, or your brother, or your priest.

I give it six months, the oboist told me in private. A year, tops. What he saw coming next, he didn't say.

Orkester Ljutmera was no different. If you made a list of the things you weren't supposed to hear on our recordings, it would go something like this:

Radana calling her second chair a shit-for-brains.

The bass player snapping off his neighbor's tuning pegs. Jadran knocking over a row of stands.

A percussionist weeping quietly backstage.

When Gregorius came along and found us, it was not love, but mutual need, at first sight. He was a conductor without an orchestra. (He'd been fired from his last band for asking whether they might be better off just leaving the instruments in their cases.) We were always running late slash falling out of bar windows slash being chased by waiters into the Koncertna Dvorana over unpaid bills. Our previous conductors had all left in tears.

The truth was, we all felt a little inauthentic. We all felt a little guilty for not being soldiers or guerrillas or ambulance drivers. And we took it out on each other in whatever ways we could. Gregorius rescued us, bless his sweaty, balding head. He found us audiences and publicity. He introduced some semblance of order. He didn't look like much, but he was scrappy and determined. On his better days, he led us in genuinely coherent and thoughtful music making. On his worse, he used a combination of bribery, cajoling, and outright threats. He excused our worst behavior, the kinds of things we couldn't even forgive ourselves.

You see, Gregorius said reasonably, things came up. Who could have predicted that the shoe thrown by the second bassoon would have split the timpani head in a way that rendered it unusable in Holst's Jupiter movement? Who could have anticipated that Jadran's prank on the accordionist would have backfired so destructively? In other words, he was our father figure, our teacher, and our redeemer. In other words, how could we not take advantage?

Lately, we'd all been trying not to notice that people were jumping ship. Nothing was said when someone stopped showing up for rehearsals. We took over the missing parts without

discussion, switching instruments mid-measure to try to cover the gaps in the score. Like a rash, the number of empty chairs continued to spread.

At least it's not a mutiny, the third violin said hopefully. He was optimistic that the second chair would be gone within the season and he would finally get to move up. The thing he kept forgetting was that our *country* might be gone within the season.

When I pointed that out, the third violin said, Even revolutions need buglers.

The politics problem had led to a cash flow problem. The markets were dropping every month, and people's salaries were going along for the ride. Every month Orkester Ljutmera sold fewer and fewer tickets. On days when we weren't rehearsing, the Koncertna Dvorana turned back into a gymnasium. It had gotten so we all associated the smell of dirty socks with tuning.

Two decades ago, the last political overthrow had ensured that most of us would go through life as orphans. The French horn had spent time in jail for protests. The contrabassoon had had half the skin on her arm burned off in an explosion. Having nowhere else compelling to go, the majority of us lived together in a little run-down hostel on the edge of Ljutmera. There was hair in the sink and holes in the wall.

The paupers' palace, we called it.

Unlike the others, I had only one roommate. I had a corner room and an adjacent broom closet for practicing. The door had no knob and the closet smelled of industrial cleaner, but it was still a perk. For the Orkester Ljutmera, it was downright glamorous.

I was the star performer, the soloist par excellence. By all accounts, I was the reason the orchestra still sold tickets. People came from six towns over just to hear my Saint-Saëns.

In the past, my onstage performances had been described with various superlatives. Inspired. Tremendous. Intense. A critic of national importance described my Bach prelude as rapturous. My talent was one of the few things Gregorius and I were agreed on. In a drunker moment, some comparisons to Jacqueline du Pré had been tossed around.

When interviewed—which was not very often, since foreign reporters never visited and local ones had learned to stay away—I told the papers that I loved playing cello but I even more loved being better at it than everyone else.

If you weren't constantly trying to best people, I said, then what the hell were you doing here?

My whole life, I'd had an overarching sense of fuck-you towards the world. The Katya Underappreciation Society, Gregorius liked to call it. Drunk, I said things like *crack my chest open and return my heart to Warsaw*. I made vast proclamations about the state of contemporary music. On tour, back when we still had the money to travel, I would race through the hotel halls, colliding with bellhops and sending stacks of room service plates shattering down.

I once broke my foot kicking a cinderblock backstage. I once shared a bottle of slivovitz with a one-armed insurgent while the rest of the orchestra waited for me to show up on opening night.

This was not to mention a certain style of behavior that was condescendingly referred to as daddy issues. This was not to mention the rumors that I'd slept with one of our old conductors on his second week in town. The others liked to remind me about the thing with the touring pianist under the touring piano. I liked to tell them to screw a donkey.

The last major fuckup—a year and a half in April—had culminated in a clinical day of speculums and sharp, scraping pain. I remembered drinking sour cherry liquor throughout the whole procedure. The father, who could have been one of several men, was not involved.

All of which is to say, I was not known for my prudence.

One of the things I liked best was to practice drunk. Around the fifth or sixth drink, I could turn off the twin metronome and tuning fork that sounded continuously in my brain. I could reach a yellow and smoky realm that was otherwise only achievable in dreams, a place where everything seemed lovely—even Radana's clarinet solos, even Orkester Ljutmera.

I was not interested in being a cliché, but nor was I interested in self-improvement. Drinking and music kept me from having to deal with my problems. Anyone could have told you that. *I* could have told you that. A third-grader could have taken a pretty accurate stab at my problems.

I was the best, and everyone knew it, and I was stuck here in this shithole, and everyone knew that, too. And that was where things were.

According to Gregorius, our rehearsals were going as well as could be hoped. The Bartok had improved to the point of bearability. The Mahler had been scrapped for a more pleasant Shostakovich. To everyone's relief, there was talk of adding some polkas to our summer program.

According to me, everything was shit. One of our percussionists, the weepy one, had quit overnight. When Jadran went to find him in the hostel, all that was left in his dresser was a note.

I'm sorry, it said. *I'd rather be dead in the army than alive in the drum section.*

But the worse thing—and there was always a worse thing—was that my cello was broken. I'd discovered it last night in the hostel, and my swearing woke up half the brass section. It was just a crack, just a small, longitudinal whisper of a fracture, but it ran up the neck in a dangerous way, and I knew it would grow. If I caught the fucker who'd broken it, I'd kill them with my bare hands.

I had a nasty suspicion that the fucker who'd broken it was the same person staring back at me from the mirror.

It was a morning rehearsal, and I had a hangover. The sound of the piccolo was making me grim about the mouth. The little shiver of broken wood was staring at me from the back of my cello.

All of which was to say, my mood was not excellent.

All of which was to say, I had reasons for acting the way I did. When I got home that evening, I found Gregorius sitting on my bunk. He had his when-are-you-going-to-learn look on his face, so I knew what was coming.

Katya, he said. Sit.

I sat.

This season, he said, leveling a finger at me, will make or break us.

You know this. I know this. Why is it so hard for you to cooperate?

I shrugged.

The audiences like our volatility, I said. It makes us seem relatable.

I thought by pointing out my colleagues' failings I might distract him from my own, more egregious fuckups, the skipped rehearsal being only the first one that came to mind.

An orchestra is like a marriage, Gregorius said. It's about accepting other people's limitations. It's an exercise in constant compromise.

Then how come I'm the only one compromising, I asked. How come I'm the one living with everyone else's imperfections.

He sighed. It struck me that I couldn't remember a time when he wasn't sighing every five minutes.

Do you want to send this entire thing down the shitter? He asked.

Do you want to be out of a job?

I scowled. He politely reminded me of our obligation to sell tickets. I gently reminded him of his obligation to our wellbeing. He pointed out, in that reasonable tone of his, a few facts about the incompatibility of alcoholism and classical performance, and then we both pointed out in furious but generally agreeing tones that the orchestra would fold without me.

On his way out the door, he took one last shot.

You're a leader, Katya, when you want to be, he said. The old Katya wouldn't need to be told that.

The old Katya, I said, was marginally less frustrated.

I could tell you about the room they held the auditions in. I could play for you my pieces: the Debussy La Mer, the Hadyn and cadenza. I could tell you about everything down to the smell of the national opera house in the country where I would have, could have, lived.

Or I could back up one week and tell you about the cloudy afternoon my family and neighbors were shot in the street outside their houses while I was in rehearsal.

Same old luck. Same sad story.

Listen to the way I played Mendelssohn. Look at how good I was at five, eight, eighteen, twenty-three years old. Look at how much potential I'd had.

Imagine what I could have done.

Once, in earlier years, a state minister had explained his theory of our country on national television.

We do what we do to test the boundaries of the state's love for us, he said. We are trying to provoke it into anger. We want to see how far its devotion really extends.

His gray and sagging face regarded us solemnly from the screen. We are all in need of constant reassurance, he said.

The evening of our dress rehearsal, we set out as a group for the Koncertna Dvorana. I'd been drinking since noon, and the whole day had gone watery and smeared at the edges. The city felt itchy, anxious. The sky had a strange green cast.

Maybe there'll be a tornado, a trumpet player said. He sounded hopeful.

We struggled our instrument cases through the streets. The closer to the center of town we got, the more the itchy feeling grew. We turned onto the main street, rounded the corner to the town square, and found ourselves in the middle of a riot.

Well, this is a nice party, Radana said.

People were holding up signs, but none of them seemed to be saying the same thing. Someone had a megaphone, but we couldn't tell what he was shouting. The people in the crowd— 80 or 90 of them, at least—were all carrying on at different tempos.

It's to support the state, said one of the flutes.

It's to *disband* the state, said one of the trumpets.

We stood there not knowing what to do. Someone suggested we go the long way around. Someone else suggested we join in.

Me, I was thinking about what Gregorius said about being a leader.

That is to say, I was approaching the idea sort of slantwise through a boozy haze. Leaders, I recalled, were the people who got stood against walls and shot at the end of revolutions. Then again, if that was the worst thing this rotten country did to you, you were getting off easy.

Which is how I ended up sitting on my case with my cello between my knees, playing our country's national anthem.

At first, the crowd couldn't hear me over their own noise. A few of them turned around, then just kept on marching. One of them asked if I'd been sent by the police.

But then Jadran got out his trombone. The flutes and oboes began assembling their instruments. One by one, they picked up the thread of the melody and joined in. The entire square filled with the sounds of our playing.

There was a mode that every professional musician knew, a mode where the sounds became tiny picks turning even tinier tumblers and hidden mechanisms in your ears, and then you could play indefinitely, no conductor, no speaking, just swept along by the music. Briefly, just for the duration of that song, we existed in that space together.

We finished the anthem. There was silence in the square. For an uncomfortable minute, we stood with our instruments still raised, waiting for the riot to turn on us.

Then: thunderous applause.

We launched into a jaunty folk dance. The crowd roared. A few members slunk off, presumably to tell Gregorius what we were up to, but we let them go.

Acoustically speaking, it wasn't ideal. The sound was swallowed by the open air, or else it bounced weirdly off the sides of the buildings in the square. We were lacking the right instruments, and no one was quite in tune with anyone else.

But we had professional-capacity lungs. We had boundless stamina in the fuck-you department. If there was one thing we had abundant preparation for, it was performing in the midst of chaos.

A few of us overturned a fruit cart and climbed on top. Someone was pretending to conduct with the handle of a pitchfork. We weren't a people known for our forbearance, and we had had all we were going to take. We played everything we knew—anthems, waltzes, concertos, commercial jingles—and the protestors sang along. This was the night we made ourselves heard.

One shop window was smashed in, then another. It got harder and harder to hear. We weren't always playing the same song as our neighbor, but that only delighted the crowd more. Their roaring blended with our music into a lovely, sweaty cacophony. At one point someone brought out smoked sausage. Wine was constantly being passed around. Near midnight, they switched to brandy.

We played on into the night. The idea of the dress rehearsal had collapsed, like a word said over and over till it lost its meaning. Old men put on their war medals and screamed at the statues. Birds and children fled from our music.

Up on top of the fruit cart, I felt serene. Subaquatic. The brandy had made everything very peaceful, and I had a sensation like soft wool had been plunged into my ears. It felt like submerging my head in the bath when someone was screaming in the next room.

I thought I saw Gregorius in the crowd. I waved to him. Beside the fruit cart, someone was vomiting all over the drums. Someone else had an antique musket and was trying to make it fire into the air. We were a wild hurting people, and we would not be made silent.

I made lovely sliding sieve noises.

I made embryonic strawberry noises. I made happy future noises, happy future noises, happy future noises.

When your cello was on the verge of breaking, an instrument repairer once told me, you could do one of three things:

You could try to strengthen it, reinforcing the weak part until it held.

You could sit back and do nothing, hope it wouldn't break at all and you'd save yourself the effort.

Or you could try to break it all the way so that next time you'd know exactly how to put it back together.

Years ago, we'd thought an orchestra would be safe for us. We'd thought we could have joy, prosperity, a stable family, the camaraderie of community, the thrill of sport. We thought we could be sages and creators, performers of lasting beauty.

What we got instead was petty disputes, bills, broken reeds, and sweaty socks.

Which is to say, I once caught myself thinking *I would have sewn little roses on her shoes. I would have played her Debussy and Brahms.*

Which is to say, I always expected to feel different, but I kept waking up the same old asshole.

Probably I would have been as bad a mother as I was a bandmate.

Probably I would have been gifted only in teaching lessons of unalloyed despair.

Sometimes things on the verge of breaking didn't behave as expected. Sometimes, instead of falling apart themselves, they broke you.

I woke up with a headache and the smell of body odor in my nose. It was afternoon, and the room spun. A man's arm was draped across me, pinning me and my hangover to the bed. I felt like I'd been running damage control on myself for a thousand years.

Back at the hostel, I drew a bath and slid in. I was just starting to get my head sorted out when someone started pounding on the door.

What is it, Gregorius? I said when I opened the door. He was fiddling with his hands.

I just got a letter, he said. From the state.

Look, I broke in. That thing yesterday wasn't my fault. Ask the others, they all joined in.

He nodded absently. He looked like he'd had even less sleep than I had.

They want to sponsor us, he said. They want us to become an official government orchestra.

Oh, I said. Good for them, I guess. Will they buy me a new cello?

He acted like he didn't hear me.

They want to give us *uniforms,* he said. He looked miserable. They want to approve our *programs*.

But is there money? I asked. I was failing to see the problem. He threw his hands up.

Who knows? He said. Who can tell anymore?

What I didn't see then was that Gregorius had just realized what the rest of us were too self-involved to see. He'd sat up and taken a good long look around and seen what purposes a state-sponsored orchestra might be used for. He'd imagined what thorough, clever consequences there might be for defectors. While the rest of us were marching around like circus animals, he'd come to the conclusion that this new interest might be far, far worse than the old indifference.

What are you going to do? I asked him. A helpless look shot across his face.

I can't say yes, he said. I can't say no. Maybe I should let you lot decide. Put it to a vote. That way, when they come for me in six months, I'll be able to say you're still fighting it out.

I tried to imagine how the Orkester Ljutmera would react. Even if it was good news, we wouldn't take it well. We'd gripe, and we'd bellyache, and at a certain point we'd look around and realize we were all alone.

I knew. I'd been there before. We'd be like divers who just realized they've left the last tank of oxygen on deck.

We'll have to be careful, Gregorius was saying. No matter what we do, they'll have our eyes on us now.

Even then, I don't think I understood what he was trying to say. I was thinking about my cello, or the riot, or the Schoenberg we were supposed to play that evening. I was thinking, I could really use a drink.

This rotten fucking country, Gregorius said sadly.

I was hearing cellos play, unbroken and lovely. I was hearing how, cutting through our unmitigated disasters of personal lives, we had played bravely, lushly, gloriously.

And everything I heard was fragile and finite.

And if you closed your eyes, you too could pretend there was nothing more to it.

CHAPTER 2

IN RUIN

Inch by inch, Deakin paints the decaying missions. He paints them at sunset when the light is golden and thick and he paints them at a distance of twenty yards, from which he can see every flake and hairline of their ruin. He makes pencil and charcoal drawings to give his hands the feel of each new mission and at night he uses these exercises to light his campfires. Before he came west he used to varnish his work in damar gum and turpentine but now he packs the paintings barely dry and rides on. If the country is deserted, he hobbles the horse behind a rise or an outbuilding and he shouts to drive off the birds and the jackrabbits and then he paints alone.

1769

The Spanish missions of Alta, California, are begun by the Franciscans and they are built with stone and lumber and stucco and their construction does not cease until the twenty-first is completed in 1823. From San Diego de Alcala in the south to San Francisco de Solano de Sonoma in the mudflats north of San Pablo Bay, the twenty-one churches and schools and cloisters and gardens line five hundred miles of coast. They are built by indentured Chumash, who learn the friars' Spanish and leave behind their cooking pots and seashells and acorn hulls. They are aligned with their *17glesias* facing the sun and their workshops and sleeping rooms and kitchens and *lavanderias* are grouped in sloppy *cuadrángulos*, the builders lacking proper surveying instruments. They are undertaken by holy and unholy men from Spain and from Baja, California, and by the time the last is finished, they have already begun to rot away.

1899

Deakin paints meticulously. He records the buzzards and the cacti and the crosses and the ruined carillons against the sky and he makes dozens of sketches of hitching posts and boulders and sage until he's sure he has them right. He sits and watches without moving until vultures begin to circle above him.

Five years ago he sold his grandfather's pocket watch for paints but now he has the best supplies money can buy. He has a brush made of a dozen bound rabbit hairs and one of pure white horsehair and one of fox fur trimmed to three-quarters of an inch. He has a man to stretch his canvases in La Jolla and he has a framer in Escondido. He uses deep rusts and yellow ochres and the colors stain his hands while elsewhere the desert sand settles into the creases of his clothing.

It is the summer of 1899, blisteringly hot. He is a vagrant with a canvas tent, a horse, and a box of paints. Alone in a vast, dusty wilderness with eighteen unfinished canvases and a heartache the size of the desert.

1824

Father Jayme prays. With the rest of the mission sleeping and the gray morning wet on his eyelids and cheeks, he prays. Sometimes he kneels before his shelf with the statue of the Blessed Virgin but more often he stands at the open window and clasps his hands and lowers his eyes. He prays quietly and his lips are unmoving and he does not ever seem to expect a response. He prays, one of the other friars once observed, like someone casting a stone into a deep well and walking away without waiting to hear it hit.

1898

In the early days, Deakin painted disasters. With his japanned box of paint and brushes and a millboard under his arm, he set out for the fires and floods and earthquakes and shipwrecks and train derailments and carriage crashes and armory explosions and murders and robberies and hangings and lynchings and other mayhem of Gilded Age Chicago. He hung out on corners near the *Tribune* offices or he loitered on the steps of the police precinct, waiting for word of the next disaster to sell to the newspapers and the broadside printers. He was cheap talent, an eye for hire, one of a thousand struggling artists in an indifferent city. He was thirty-two years old and he had no life besides painting.

The disasters paid enough for tuition at Lemuel Hastings's art school and little else. With his classmate John Griffey, he rented a room where they lived on old bread and turnips and in the evenings he painted. Even then they were settling into their roles, John saving pennies and investing where he could and Deakin getting drunk and carrying his paint box to the dark bridges and alleys where whores and gamblers collected.

Through John he found a job hand-coloring photographs in a building on Grand and LaSalle. Hour after hour adding washes to the albumen prints, the portraits of men in bowlers and women holding anemic children and stiff-chinned grandmothers. The dyes he used were poisonous and made his eyes water relentlessly and so on the day he came home to Maxwell Street and found a woman standing in their tiny stinking room and peering at his canvases, his first thought was that he was dreaming her.

Her name was Sarah and she was the sister of one of John's early business partners. Deakin watched her from the doorway, thinking no one had ever looked at his work quite like that, and while John and the friend discussed Deakin's classmates, he walked over to stand

beside the painting with her. It was a quick sketch, unfinished, of the city water tower in winter. Up close she smelled like cheap soap and when she sensed him standing there, she didn't look up, only cocked her head and said, "That's exactly how it feels here in December."

The second time she came to Maxwell Street, it was to see Deakin painting a still life. This time she did not bring her brother. She kept perfectly silent while he worked, only remarking that he stared like a starving man not at the food but at the easel. After she left, he emptied out the tin box that held his newspaper earnings and began saving for an engagement ring.

In the end Deakin would miss all the great disasters of his century: he had not yet arrived in the city when Chicago burned; he was born five decades too late for the earthquake that destroyed the Alta, California, missions; Krakatoa was halfway across the world; and it would be another eight years before San Francisco shook and burned and fell into the harbor.

But he had met Sarah and she would manage to eclipse them all. Sarah, the true catastrophe of his life.

1830

When the Mexican government secularized the missions and divided them into land grants for their farmers, the friars took their tithes and patens and they scattered. Earthquakes came next. Floods. Indian revolts. The missions became inhabited by looters and beggars and outlaws who stole the timber and adobe bricks and left behind walls that crumbled in a breeze. Bats came and roosted in the galleries and bell towers and tiny shrews nested among the vestments. The courtyards were overgrown with weeds. By the late nineteenth century, many were becoming dust.

The afternoon is dull and overcast and as he rides up the ridge toward San Gabriel Arcángel, he thinks salvation is imminent. Chicago is a world away. There are no distractions. In the three weeks since he has come west, his life has returned to a thing of devotion, to something solitary and singular and sharp and although the paintings have not yet made him feel better, they also have not made him feel worse.

Ever since he learned about the missions, Deakin has been interested in the folly that leads men to build giant churches and paint murals and pray their lives away for the glory of something they cannot grasp and that may never reward them. He wants to understand them, to know what makes each different from a pile of ruined stones and timber and different from a ghost. He wants to know the minds of the original builders. What inspired them to create this mission, here, in this place, in this manner? Were they looking at their Bibles or at the way the sky cupped the mountains or were they looking at anything at all? What was this place to them and to their god? Everything here interacts with the land and everything is contained in its light and shadows and on the good days, he can ride through the hills and understand it all.

Other days he just paints what he sees. The missions are no more than the sum of their ruined privies and dovecotes, and the god they commemorate is antiquated and irrelevant.

When he reaches the *campo santo* outside San Gabriel Arcángel, he dismounts and hobbles the horse. By tomorrow he will have the preliminary sketches but today the mission is vast with possibility and he will put off committing it to paper for several more minutes because he loves the moments when it could still be anything.

He stands alone in the pearly morning and looks at the mission. The buttresses are like giant, ruined ribs and the date palms have half-died of drought and there is a honeycomb of bells in the *campanario* that catches the breeze but the bells do not ring.

1824

Father Jayme has lived at La Misión de María Santísima, Nuestra Señora Dolorosísima de la Soledad since its founding in 1791 and every morning since the last stone was laid in the first building, he has prayed. He has prayed for friends and enemies, for his parents in Vallodalid and for the Indian converts, prayed in sorrow, prayed in gratitude, prayed with a back breaking from fieldwork and with hands warmed by a good fire, and more than anything else, he has prayed and prayed for faith.

At Nuestra Señora de la Soledad, the friars have thrived; here they have a church and a chapel, four granaries, two warehouses, and fifteen miles of aqueduct. They have the daily labor of several hundred Indian neophytes and on their three ranches, they own five thousand sheep, six thousand cattle, a vineyard, and an orchard. Without ever leaving the mission, they have the facilities to make tallow and soap and cheese and horseshoes, to bake tiles for their roofs and floors, to weave altar cloths and habits and baptismal gowns for neophytes.

They have all this and still Father Jayme is not certain if they have ever had God.

1898

Love. In the evenings after his work at the print shop, Deakin would take a paintbrush and trace the contours of her body and raise the fine hairs along the curve of her spine and after, he would paint while she slept. They were poor as immigrants, and they did not often laugh together, not

like when she was with John and her brother and the four of them stayed up drinking cheap Polish liquor till dawn, but when they were alone, she told him he was the best painter she had ever seen and for nearly a year in the mornings and evenings and all through the nights, he thought of her and didn't sleep and he painted and he painted and he painted.

1824

In his three decades at Nuestra Señora de la Soledad, Father Jayme has learned how much there remains to learn. He knows that sin is not always what it seems and he can speak the eight Esselen words that signify *soul*. He has seen a woman rise from the dead with coins over her eyes and candles in her fists and above all he has learned that a person can wake suffocating at the edge of a great void, can grip his pallet to be sure it and the stone floor beneath still exist, can dig welts into the palms of his own hands and still find no comfort.

I am here, can't you hear me?

He can remember so clearly those days when he was young and the mission was still a dirt field and his ministry was tilling fields and laying the *zanjas*. In those days he was still visited with not infrequent bursts of confidence, sudden and ecstatic, and when he looked out at everything they had sown and threshed, he knew incontrovertibly that this was his life's work.

Now he sings Sanctus to an empty tabernacle, breaks bread in an empty kitchen, kneels on the stone floor of his empty room with his empty, aching heart. So often he is reduced to those quiet moments at dawn when he prays his novenas and no one answers and nothing is left but the bare facts of his existence, a growling stomach and a neophyte, red with clay dust and clumsy at the morning bells, beginning to call his name from outside the door.

He cannot say if God exists but when the rain comes down over the mountains, it is a small and inscrutable comfort.

1898

"You're the least entertaining painter I've ever met," John said. "Art is not all discipline, you know. You don't always have to work so hard."

Over time it became a game: John would stand in the street singing or jump out from behind the curtain or flick peanuts across the room, trying to startle his friend into some show of emotion or passion, while Deakin sat at his easel. And Deakin would hunch his shoulders and tighten the line of his mouth and ignore what he knew: He worked too hard. He was no fun. He excelled at drawing perfect lines and his angles could make a surveyor weep but he did not know if he had passion. Lemuel Hastings did not seem to think so.

What Deakin dreamed of—what he had always dreamed of—was that he would paint something that was perfectly, incontrovertibly honest. Disasters had always been easy: he simply recorded what was already there, all those grand excesses of chaos and emotion and tragedy, and the newspapers paid him more or less sufficiently. But he wanted to paint something more than the sensational, something subtler and truer, and his greatest private fear was that he could spend his whole life working and in the end still find truth inscrutable and finally lay down to die interred in his own failures.

He has sat and watched the wind corrugate water and he has seen snow fall horizontally and he knows all the rules of perspective and of mixing colors. Here was one more rule: whatever you chose to worship would eventually destroy you.

1899

San Diego de Alcalá, San Luis Rey de Francia, San Juan Capistrano, San Gabriel Arcángel, San Fernando Rey de España, San Buenaventura, Santa Bárbara Virgen y Mártir, Santa Inés Virgen y Mártir.

Today he sits in the dirt and sketches the ninth: La Purísima Concepción de María Santísima. The roof falling in, the stucco scabrous, the Santa Ynez looming high over the ruined adobe walls. Beside him are his bottles of linseed oil and his tubes of paint and his rag for cleaning the brushes and above him is a single vulture wheeling slowly. He's waiting for sunset, when he can begin painting with a light that is ancient and liquid and bottle-mad and dusty.

He remembers Lemuel Hastings pacing the classroom while his two dozen students sketched, trembling.

"Give a definition of figural *repoussoir*. You should know this, Deakin."

In each painting he includes something of her—an S in the shadow of a rock, a branch that reminds him of the slope of her clavicle, a faint scatter of flowers like the kind she wore in her hair one Chicago Sunday—and as he sketches he thinks this time he will capture the right feeling, he will find what he needs within himself, and he will render the missions truly.

He imagines walking into their house in Santa Rosa and laying the twenty-one canvases out on the floor. He imagines Sarah turning to him with wonder on her face.

You'll never find anyone like her. You should know this.

1899

Seventy-five years after the great *terremoto*, many of the ruins are still unstable, still crumbling.

What is the color of that wall? What is its meaning?

What does he see?

1898

He watched her kill a rat once. It was in the early days on Maxwell Street and they were still new and awkward around each other. The rat was caught in the trap beneath the washbasin and she stood over it with a skillet and as he walked in the door, she brought the skillet down. His heart jumped to see the muscles in her neck strain and to see her use the rag to pick up the pieces.

She looked up and saw him watching.

"Don't be angry," she said, because that was how things were in those days, a struggle to pretend that their lives were not petty and miserable and that they could keep house on three dollars a week and not mind the smell of the neighbors' chickens or the noise of the factories across the river and that John did not love her, he did not love her, he would never fall in love with his best friend's wife.

"Let me help," Deakin said, and he took the rag and went to the yard to wash it out. It was always the unwieldy and the ravaged and the wildly impractical that he fell in love with.

1898

Such is the disintegration of things: swifter, harsher, more irrevocable than people expect.

For Deakin, it began with a painting. It began months before, actually, but he didn't notice until he was beginning to surface from this newest work, a man crouched on the steps of the cathedral and looking out at a ragman burning sticks in the street.

He had been working on the painting for three days and he was exhausted and giddy and could have slept on his feet but there was still one patch that was troubling him, one tiny corner,

and so he was still hunched in front of his easel with the fine hog's-hair brush and the flaking palette when Sarah appeared and began cooking supper.

He didn't notice when the dishes stopped rattling and she came to stand behind him but when she reached to trace the outline of the cathedral and the ragman's face, he jumped.

"I wish you would let my brother commission some work," she said. "It wouldn't be as bad as you think. We could finally afford that room by the brewery, the one near John's new place."

He had never heard her complain before nor had it occurred to him to want something different than the life they were leading. But he had no time to register these thoughts, because she was going on to say that his work was lovely, really, but she wasn't sure if it would ever sell and what was the point if no one wanted to buy his paintings and hang them on the wall and did he really expect her to cook cabbage forever?

Then she said, "I've been talking with John," and he knew, knew as unequivocally as if he had already heard the speech and seen it all happen a very long time ago in a story.

Eventually he would flee but it would first take Chicago growing cold and unfamiliar, take Sarah and John eloping and buying two hundred head of cattle from a Mexican named Apolinario to start a ranch in Santa Rosa, take six more months of dull and relentless misery, vowing alternately to ride after her and to never think of her again, and finally the realization that whatever else he had lost, he was still a painter and he had forty-three dollars rolled tightly inside an empty tube of cyan blue and there was no reason at all for him not to go west.

There is more to life than not being alone.

1899

In Salinas the woman approaches him. It's been two months since he left Chicago and in that time he has finished more than half the paintings and nicknamed his horse Linseed and has not managed to go a single day without thinking about Sarah. He is only in Salinas for the night—he has rented a room in this town where the belching black locomotives come through twice a day and the Chinese work silently in the sugar-beet fields—and tomorrow he will ride out to the thirteenth, Nuestra Señora de la Soledad.

He is sitting in front of the Salinas Mutual Building and Loan Association, sketching the dry well across the street, his hand catching the shapes of the stones and the small metal windlass, when the woman comes up and asks if he is an artist.

Yes.

She has a sharp tongue and hair the gray-blonde of dirty ice and she introduces herself as the wife of a local farmer but the way she rests her hand on his shoulder when she peers at his sketch does not spell wife in any language Deakin knows. She points out a smudge of blue on Deakin's shirtsleeve and he finds himself talking about the missions and the canvases and the strange orange stillnesses that settle over the land just before dusk, all these secret things he'd sworn he would not tell another living person until the paintings were finished and perhaps not even then.

Before he knows it they are making plans to have supper. That night they will drink tequila and eat beans and pork and flapjacks and talk about the cattle trade and the droughts and the woman, the wife, will laugh so loudly, the other tables stare. By the time they are finishing their meal, he will have agreed to take her with him to the mission tomorrow, to let her watch

him paint, and to do some sketches for a portrait and even though he is annoyed by this loud woman with the absent husband, he is intrigued too.

At the door to his boarding house, she steps close.

"You have a thread," she says and then her hand is on his chest and he is dizzy with her scent, dizzy with the thought of Sarah and with the passing of all these empty days.

"It was coming off your shirt," she says, and snaps it.

1824

The rain falls and falls and it is no longer beautiful. It puddles in the gardens and soaks the fulling wool in the mill, and in the *monjerío* the girls shake it from their hair. For days everyone watches the sky. The river foams and heaves and in the end it spills over and floods the Salinas Valley.

From the hills, the friars look down at their desolate land. Their mission is known up and down the coast as the lonely mission and from here they can understand why. *Soledad*, the only Spanish word the early Indians knew to describe this valley. Father Jayme stands on the hillside and watches the new corn drown, wondering whose words they would use for *heartbreak* or *silence* or *cruelty*? He has aged five years this week.

By the time the waters recede, the sheep have drowned and most of the horses are missing and the whole vineyard is a blackening snarl. There is a terrible smell that lingers for weeks and many of the Yokuts and Esselen who scattered with the flood do not return at all. The church is completely destroyed.

On their first day back, the friars gather for prayer in the ruined tabernacle. "Blessed Mary, Our Lady of Solitude, Most Sorrowful Mother," and around them the caved-in epistle

wall, the statue of Mary warped and peeling, and mold already beginning to spread up the reredos. When one of the friars solemnly proclaims that they will rebuild, Father Jayme chokes. Who could abide such a savior?

1899

Thirty miles from town, Nuestra Señora de la Soledad is barely standing. The roof is gone and the walls are collapsing and in a few more years, it will be impossible to tell what was here or that it was built by human hands. From a hundred yards the fallen beams look like bones but up close they are worm knotted and powdery and grass has grown across the floors. The rubble around the mission is knee-high on all sides and the bricks are burnt a pale red by the sun so they are all but indistinguishable from the dirt that surrounds them. In the high summer sun, it is not only a godless place but a fearful one.

They ride up together and dismount. The woman is quieter today and he thinks perhaps she is regretting the decision too. He tells her to stand at the far corner of the ruins, not certain if he will paint her or if he will leave her out entirely, and mumbles that he needs to walk around.

Inside the walls there is more to see: a ruined wood *carreta*, skeletal and crazy; a blue rosary; ceramics brought on Manila galleons, English creamware and Spanish majolica and a ginger beer bottle all the way from Scotland; wooden spoons and bent incense holders; a clay cooking pot and a single iron spur. Everything abandoned and everything wrecked.

He'll go back outside. He'll tell her to leave. He'll help her onto her horse and when she's on the road back to Salinas, then he will begin his sketches.

When he comes through the mission gate, she is undressing. Button by button, a slow peeling away of gingham and lace. While her fingers work the fabric, she stands waiting for him like an angel in the sun.

1824

It is not quite beautiful.

Standing in the ruined church, Father Jayme does not realize he has spoken aloud until he sees the Esselen staring. He feels briefly ridiculous. At this moment the church contains nothing beautiful, is in fact a disaster, and yet still there is an immense solemnity to it, a sorrow that reflects perfectly their damp and weeping namesake in her immense painted crown.

But what Father Jayme means to say is that he is old and tired and that aging priests like him should not be forced to see the work of their hands being destroyed. These ruined grounds remind him too much of praying, weak and torn with parts decaying out of sight of the sun. His worship is no longer something that comes down singing from the sky and joins him in the fields. There is an anger and an ugliness to it and there is a loss of control he tries never to acknowledge because it is dark and wildly terrifying and he is small and growing smaller.

Father Apolinario is calling to him from the south transept and so he goes to help move another statue of María Santísima. When they are finished they drop to their knees in benediction but Father Jayme is too preoccupied to pray and has been for days.

Here, he thinks, is what worship really is: it is obsession; it is shameful and extravagant need; it scrabbles and screams and enfolds you in ice, in terror and doubt; it is selfish and selfless, hanging on for dear life; it makes you submit, submit, bow down and submit to that thing you love that will never submit itself to you.

The irony is this: all summer long, they needed the rain.

1899

San Carlos Borromeo del Río Carmelo.

He leaves Salinas and rides all day and all night to stand before this church, this crumbling loveliness with its *mudéjar* tower and star window. He has ridden through creeks and gravely arroyos and a shower so sudden it caused the horse to rear and almost throw him. Now it is that blue time of day just before dark and he sits and watches. Bugs are straying into the wet palette but still he does not put away the blank canvas and easel.

There is a woman waiting for him in Salinas, a woman who is already married and who will put his hands on her breasts and look at his twenty-one paintings when they are finished and spread out on the floor and not ask, "Is this enough?" He doesn't know. It is new and foolish and when she laughs with paint in her hair, there is nothing he can do and when he sees an easel, there is nothing he can do.

As he watches, a rock falls somewhere inside the roofless church and skitters to the floor and out shoots a single coyote, scared, alone. It streaks off into the sage and Deakin is already measuring it with his eyes; he is dabbing the canvas with new color; he is ready to turn away from the world's grand ruins and follow a small, shivering life wherever it might go.

CHAPTER 3

BONNIE, PATTY, KID GLOVE, MA

Orchard

We discuss role models.

"The Comtesse de la Motte," Thea says.

She's weighing an apple in each hand. Ahead of us, about twenty feet away, is an old carpentry shed where we've chalked up outlines of the cops, those bastards. A sweet vinegary smell of rot drifts up every time one of the apples hits and bursts.

"Ann and Mary Drowning," I say, sending a real mushy one against the biggest cop. A breeze shivers down through the tops of the trees. Thea rapid-fire throws her two apples, whack-splat.

"Marm Mandelbaum," she says. "Bless her crooked New York heart." "And Boston Nancy," I say. "Blue Liz. Little Kate Cooley."

"Your mother, may she rest in peace."

A respectful moment of silence. These are the thieves we've chosen to worship. These are the heroes of our day.

"Fuck me," Thea sighs, shaking her head. "Those dames were fucking glorious."

I grin and dig my thumbnail into another apple, torturing the flesh. The wasps are swarming lazily in the afternoon light.

"We'll be glorious too," I say. "Don't you forget it."

It's about 3 p.m., mid-October. We've been out in the orchard for hours already, waiting for the sun to go down so everything can start. Overhead, a forlorn honking from the migrating geese.

As far as waiting goes, this isn't so bad. In the past half year, Thea and I have sat through rain and cold and hunger and the flu. We've heard things that lack description and seen ugliness I won't go into. Yesterday we watched a rooster get its eye pecked out by another rooster. Sitting in an empty orchard, half a mile from a bootlegger's cabin, drunk on the smell of fermenting fruit—there are worse places to be.

A hard little green one. Upper right jaw.

"Worst case scenario," Thea says. She's finished with the apples and starts fiddling with our pick set. She jiggles a half diamond back and forth in an imaginary lock. "Go."

"Dogs," I say. "We'll get some hamburger and come back. Easy."

"Security system," she says. "All the windows alarmed."

"We'll go fast," I say. "We'll take the door off its hinges. Whatever."

"Locked vault?"

"Come on," I say, tossing another apple. It hits the chalk cop square in the solar plexus and skids down the wall trailing brown juice. "You know I hate this shit. Let's just see how it goes."

Thea gives me a look: half-exasperated, half-affectionate. The thing is, we have a sixth sense about these things. We're already pretty sure we won't get caught tonight. A good thief can feel it in her bones, can tell if there's danger in the air or if she's about to get caught.

Tonight—the fall festival starting up in town, plenty of drunk, distracted people—is going to be a lucky night.

"What do you think?" I ask now, pulling a baggie out of my pocket. "A little something?" We inventory what's left. We have little green ones in the shape of skulls and toxic-looking white ones in prickly blue powder. We've got some yellow tablets that go giggling down your throat and a dark pink number that swirls when you look at it.

Thea holds out her hand.

"Surprise me," she says, and I do.

We both close our eyes and swallow something random.

When we run out of apples, I tell Thea more stories about our favorite heroes. The Russian jewel thief Sonka Golden Hand. The treacherous Sumerian princess Inanna. The Forty Elephants gang, 300 years old and counting.

How did you rule your crooked empire, Alice Diamond? What were you thinking, 27-year-old Roberta Wesson, when you wrapped your skirt around your hand and smashed the window of the crooked sheriff's house? Did it feel good, standing over his sleeping body, pistol cocked?

A weightless feeling slides over me. The whole world is sunshine. I close my eyes and dream of glory.

Juvenile Offenders

We met last year under the ticket counter at the bus station, teenagers on the run. We were crouched close, breathing hard, each hiding from different authorities. It was nearly an hour before we could crawl out, plenty of time to discover our mutual interests. By the time we snuck away on a northern Greyhound, we'd made a blood oath, cut our fingertips with a dirty razor, crossed our hearts, and hoped to die.

At that point I'd run away from the children's home more times than I could count and Thea had stopped speaking to her foster family. We'd both been on our own for a while, collecting nickels from beneath vending machines and swiping bread from convenience stores. We'd seen people arguing with thin air, people carrying all their belongings in a trash bag, people shaking through the blue-horrored jellies on the Tuesday express. In those days, we were both already stealing, sure, but it was only for survival.

Our first big job together, we stole a canoe. We walked straight out of the sporting goods store with it on our shoulders, no receipts, no questions asked. We sold it to a college kid later that day and ate our first full meal in weeks. If you looked confident enough, we learned, you could get away with almost anything.

After that it was prettier things—lockets, vintage furs, raspberry liquor. Thea stole two designer handbags while I distracted a salesclerk. We once smuggled champagne and crab out of a supermarket. Sometimes we resold the stuff, but more often we ate fast food, we slept in parks, and travelled by hitchhiking. Even when we had some in our pockets, money was never the point.

Before we met, we'd been fucking around on the brink of various catastrophes. Thea had run around a school naked except for a bow tie. I'd set a construction site on fire. We'd jumped off bridges and out of speeding cars, felt gravity lift our organs into our throats. I'd run four miles through a forest with a stolen wristwatch in my fist, trying to shed myself somewhere among the burnt red pine needles. We both had rap sheets a mile long and growing.

After we joined up, we didn't have to work so hard. We each had an accomplice, someone to watch our backs, and we could turn our attention to more elaborate plans. We were

building up for bigger things, scheming and rehashing and meanwhile robbing our way up and down the Eastern seaboard.

A few years ago, back when I was still doing petty ten- and twenty-dollar jobs, a cop asked me, why did I act the way I do?

Because prettiness was expensive. Because life was short and boredom was long. Because. Because. Because.

Here's the thing I've learned: It's not the why that matters, it's the what you do next.

B & E

The sun's been down for nearly an hour before we make our move. Under a buttery, creamy moon, we get to our feet and pick our way across the orchard, moving slow in the dark. Down the rows. Across the road. Up the hill.

The flashlight beam bobs in the dark ahead of us. We are cats padding velvet-smooth up the ridge to the cabin. We are wind-tasters, savoring the smells of wood smoke and damp grass and trees. We are half a mile away and closing in fast.

The bootlegger's cabin sits on the downslope of the hill. A little ways off is the silhouette of the still, its giant copper drum and its tubing like antennae. We walk slowly, carefully, up to the dark windows. All quiet. No one home.

The lock on the door is loose, sloppy in its housing. It takes Thea about ten seconds to find the right pick, another ten to jimmy the lock. I hold my breath for the telltale click, and then we're in.

Inside it's dark and musty smelling like a hayloft or a chapel. Our flashlight catches the jars all at once, reflecting back needles of broken-off light. There are rows and rows of them,

more than we can count: jars lined up on shelves, jars labeled and unlabeled, jars full and sparkling in the artificial light.

"Whoa," Thea says.

"Yeah," I say.

What we're looking at is the moonshine of legend and tragedy, the kind of drink that convinces you to burn down your house or else take off all your clothes and dance naked in the rain. Songs have been written about this stuff, as have federal warnings. They say it looks like water and goes down like bleach.

The cabin itself has hardly any furniture, just a cot and table against the far wall and a counter for bottling under the shelves. Next to the door, there's an old photo of the famous bootlegger Bill McCoy.

"I bet my mother knew him," I tell Thea, nodding at the picture. "This guy has good taste."

She doesn't bother to look up. She's already loading jars into her backpack, stacking them in two at a time. This is the part I love best: the quick-fingered rustle inwards, the heart pounding, zap of electricity to the brain, thrills, chills, dopamine fix. The precise moment a thing stops being theirs and starts being mine. A feeling like my body's dipped in sun, like I'm bright and shiny and somewhere in the distance a gramophone's playing all my favorite songs.

In three minutes flat, we're done. We load our backpacks onto our shoulders, wipe the doorknob clean. It feels like the start of a great party when all your favorite friends show up, like everything good is still in front of you.

I stand on the porch and, without even knowing why, pick up a stone and throw it through the front window.

In the seconds after it crashes, we run. I feel the wind at the back of my neck, the backpack straps cutting into my shoulders. Thea is running beside me, laughing or screaming, ecstatic and wild in the night air.

At the bottom of the hill, we stop and look at each other, panting. I think of the Comtesse de la Motte giving us a powdered smile. I think of Delilah, one hand clutching Samson's hair, the other her knife.

Thea takes one of the jars and passes it to me. I uncap it, feel the fumes scorch my lungs.

"A toast," she says.

"To being glorious," I say.

We tilt our throats to the sky and drink deep.

The Black-Hearted Bess Marlingspike

In my favorite story, my mother holds up a cider mill. With a silver derringer in each boot she cleans out the cash register and takes the locked safe, which is discovered days later in pieces at the bottom of a ravine. The police report notes that she also demands a gallon of cider and a dozen homemade donuts for the road. When I picture the story, I like to imagine her speeding away, the cinnamon sugar glittering at the corners of her mouth, the passenger seat awash in cash and crumbs.

In Thea's favorite story, my mother befriends an auto tycoon and steals ten bottles of Hennessy from his personal cellar. It's not improbable, given how charming she was. How charming the stories say she was. Even though I wasn't old enough to remember, I swear I can sometimes hear her voice, low and hypnotic, lulling me to sleep.

Growing up, I found clippings of all the newspaper reports at the local library: the convertible and the case of champagne, the ambassador's family china, the suitcase full of gold Rolexes. Weekends at the children's home, I'd beg a staff member to take me so I could go and read them over and over. Three-inch headlines. Sensational heists. Blaze of glory, RIP.

Later, out of a sense of obligation, I'd steal the clippings.

When I got older, people started recognizing me as Bess Marlingspike's daughter. A few of them, old friends of hers, took it upon themselves to contact me, teach me some skills, give me a leg up in the trade. But those newspaper stories about my mother were the beginning of everything I know:

Style matters.

Charm goes a long way.

Don't steal the thing you want. Steal the thing everyone else wants.

Sleight of Hand

On the way home, we practice our pickpocketing.

"The trick's in the wrist," Thea says. "You have to hold it—no, more like this."

"And be smooth," I say.

"And distract them," she says. "God, this really is harder than it looks."

We're pretending we're strangers in a crowded train station, slipping things in and out of each other's back pockets.

"Did you feel that?" I ask, her bracelet between my first and second fingers. "Did you feel that?"

The stars are out, fat and pulsing. Our backpacks thud against our spines. We're giddy and drunk and achey and it's cold out, cold enough to see our breath. The moonshine has distorted the ground, made it wobbly and silver, given a children's-book quality to everything. The orchard is as calm and unkempt as we left it, but in this mood even the trees look hilarious.

We're nearly back at the carpentry shed when we hear the noise. It's unmistakable, a branch snapping at close range. We freeze and hear another branch snap, then another. Something big is crashing toward us, something moving fast, and we're too laden down with moonshine to hide.

"Fuck," Thea hisses. The noise is only few rows over and getting nearer, nearer –

The thing breaks into our row and freezes, its eyes sending back tiny mirrors at our flashlight beam.

A deer. A doe.

"Oh my god," I whisper. My knees are wobbly from shock. In the intervening seconds, a fawn pushes clumsily through the trees and comes to stand next to its mother, the two of them regarding us silent and unblinking. Moments later, they're bounding away.

"Jesus," Thea says. She's grabbed my arm and hasn't let go. "I thought that was it. The game was up. Like that time in the antiques store. God, I was about to piss myself."

I nod, feeling the blood drain back into my arms and legs. Now that it's over, I feel a tiny bit disappointed, like we've been cheated out of something. The golden feeling is gone, replaced by a slight sickness, too much moonshine and not enough dinner.

"Come on," I say. "Let's get inside. It's freezing out."

Inside the carpenter's shed, we've made a little tent out of two sawhorses, draping a plastic tarp over them and spreading a blanket on the filthy floor below. We crawl underneath the

tarp and slide into our sleeping bags without bothering to take off our coats. It smells like sawdust, but the shed is dry and we've both slept in worse.

We scrunch inwards till we're curled against each other. Our breaths steam the tarp. One of the opened bottles manages to make its way under here and we pass it back and forth with the baggie, getting giggly, spilling moonshine on the sleeping bags.

"Tell me a story," Thea says, and so I tell her about Ulrike and the Terrible Twenty, about Cockney pickpockets and wicked rumrunners. I tell her about my mother, things I've read and things I've invented. I talk until I'm not sure whether what I'm saying is truth or lies or somewhere in-between.

Eventually, I feel her breath slow and stretch toward sleep. I'm drowsy, too, playing with a Zippo we stole from a kid two towns back, making a glowing orange world, a little sunset habitat under our tarp. In my mind, I'm replaying the final theft of Bess Marlingspike in all its Technicolor gorgeosity: shock of headlights, gunmetal and flames, the racket deafening and the cops falling one by one, guts and gore, until all but the very last one are dead.

Thea shifts beside me in her sleeping bag.

"What are you thinking about?" she asks dreamily.

I drift the lighter back and forth, scattering shadows across the blanket.

"Possibilities," I say.

And the dome of the world is sherbet and fire.

Interlude

With the pills, I dreamed we could fly and live in the trees like animals. We ate acorns and berries, and birds taught us to sing. There was rain some nights, but we were happy, mostly.

Then Thea was gone and my mother was up in the tree. She was dressed like a stage coach robber and she had flowers in her hair. She told me someone had put out poisoned oats to kill the rats, and then I saw we were the rats. Towards the end, the dream warped and I was standing before a parole officer who was holding cuffs and chains in her hands.

"You are so very young," she told me, grinning. Her mouth looked like it could devour a city.

The deer from the orchard was looking at me coolly.

"But what are you doing at the hour of triumph?" it asked. "Who gets to stay for long on the burning ridge?"

Festival

I wake with a rolling nausea. The moonshine's worn off, left everything watery and washed out at the edges. There's a roaring in my head like an entire ocean trying to squeeze in through my ears.

I turn over. Thea's awake next to me.

"I think I'm dying," she groans.

I roll back over, bury my head in the sleeping bag.

"No kidding," I say.

For breakfast, we split some stale bagels and an orange pill. We pack up, grim and hungover, while we wait for it to kick in. Sleeping bags rolled. Jars recapped. Nothing left behind. Today we'll head to the next town, the next job.

And who knows? It's chillier today than yesterday, and soon we'll need to find somewhere warm to spend the winter. Maybe we'll meet some real friends. Maybe we'll find a

thief boyfriend to carry around our moneybags for us. I've pictured it often enough, mostly when I was lonely and sleeping on some dismal floor, wondering where my next meal was coming from, thinking, sure, it could be like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, a race to the bottom, who's the most lethal motherfucker in this relationship?

When I say this out loud, Thea rolls her eyes.

"Come on," she says. "We ought to get going."

We walk into town, our bags heavy and clunking. It's not a big place, only a few streets and some faded storefronts, but there's the big festival going on and every road is lined with parked cars. Crossing the bridge, they honk at us, pointing and taking pictures of the glittering river. In the aggressive morning light, men in waders stand in the shallows and cast their fishing poles in elaborate patterns, whippy against the white reflection of the water.

"Hey," I say as we approach the festival. "Before we look for a ride, let's pick up some things here. Grab some cash, you know."

"Yeah?" Thea says. The whole walk into town she's been quiet, scuffing her shoes.

"Well," I say, confused by her silence. "There's no reason we shouldn't load up before we hit the road. All these people, it just kind of makes sense."

She shrugs. The pill we took for breakfast is turning cartwheels in my brain.

"Fine," she says. "Let's go."

Inside the gate, things are just getting started for the day, the vendors laying out pumpkins and Indian corn, the cotton candy machine warming up. Thea and I weave in and out of the crowd in an invisible pattern, flickering, menacing. Soon it doesn't matter that she's not talking, we're back in our old rhythms and signaling with our eyes, how about that guy, he looks like a good one, get a load of this joker, wallet already halfway out of his pocket.

It's so easy it's almost not fun. Everyone's distracted: by rides and caramel apples and games, by sloppy dates or by their own miserable families, grim and silent, lips pressed together. There are children running all over the place, bumping into people left and right, and what's one more jostle, excuse me, sorry, didn't see you, oops, looks like you dropped your wallet, let me help you with that, no problem, you have a good day.

After about half an hour, we stop behind a souvenir tent, out of sight of the midway. My pockets are bulging and I'm feeling marked: missing shadow, dark stain of guilt, whatever.

"Okay, here's what I'm thinking. We get out of town, go somewhere a good ways away. Then our next job should be big. I mean, really big. I'm talking speedboat, sports car, Bess-level shit."

Thea is counting out our haul, dividing the cash into two equal piles. She doesn't say anything.

"And I think we should go west," I continue. The pill is mashing up my thoughts, making me talk too fast. "All the great thefts happened out there. Maybe Vegas, you know? Or else Europe, but we'd have to get passports."

Silence.

"And we should come up with a signature," I say. "Some sort of calling card. All the big players had them."

Thea throws down the money.

"Jesus Christ, Cleo! Just because you want something doesn't mean you automatically get it." She stamps her foot like a little kid. "You can't just be a famous thief, you know? You can't just say you're going to be great like that'll keep us from getting in trouble."

I take a step forward. There are dollar bills all over the ground between us.

"You were the one who stole the steaks, Thea. You were the one who just stole half those fucking wallets. What do you mean we can't be thieves?"

She says nothing. I ball up my fists.

"Really, tell me what you're talking about. Bonnie was a waitress before she met Clyde, you know that? And Anne Bonny was a servant's daughter. We can be whatever we want, that's the whole fucking point."

"You have a death wish," she says. She's looking at me like she's just figured out something important. "That's it, isn't it? Big bad Cleo with her big bad criminal ways."

Back on the midway, people are starting to look around.

"Who said anything about being dead?" I hiss. "All I wanted to talk about was going west. What's wrong with you today?"

"You don't care if we get caught because you think it'll make you a hero," she spits. "Newsflash, Cleo, dying doesn't make you as great as your mother. It just makes you dead."

I stand stock still for a minute.

Then I flip her off and storm away.

My pulse is pounding in my ears. The festival roils and churns around me. So what, she doesn't want to steal with me? Fine, let her leave. I've had fights before; they didn't kill me. I was stealing before I met Thea, I'll be stealing after she's gone.

I stomp down the midway. Fire juggler, jack-o'-lantern stand, exotic animal handler. We swore a blood oath. We stole a croquet set together. How dare she? How the fuck dare she? I stop outside the animal tent. A sprinkled sawdust ring. Signs for tigers, cheetahs, kangaroos.

No one around. No one to stop me.

Shootout

This is how Bess Marlingspike dies:

She leaves me (six months old, baby stroller) at a motel.

She drives to the music shop. It's nighttime, and she works carefully. Picking the lock, touching nothing.

She steals the Strad. The workbench is cluttered. She doesn't want to use a light, so she finds it with other senses. Smell of old reeds. Click of metal buttons. Keys and valves.

She goes outside. A whirl of blue and red lights. Police, hands in the air. She drops the violin case and draws her pistol.

The gun jams. It's one of her derringers: antique, sentimental, rarely used. She hits it against the heel of her hand. It coughs up one more bullet and then jams again.

She is shot.

She is shot.

She is shot.

She dies in the parking lot. Blood, paramedics, TV crews, the works.

A question: Which do you abandon, the thing you want or the person who stands in your way?

Westward, Young Woman

A week later, and I'm driving on the surface of the moon. Craters, riverbeds, dry valleys of striped and jagged rock. South Dakota soil is bumpy to begin with and I'm not exactly on a road, but I'm doing my damnedest. The cops are two hundred yards back and gaining fast. I'm laughing out loud.

It's early morning. All the shadows are long and ghostly and torn where the rocks intersect with the sky. I've been driving all night and now I'm pushing eighty, listening to the van rattle on its axis, wondering how many miles it's got left.

Last week, I walked through the festival with a boa constrictor draped around my neck. I found Thea on the midway using a bottle of moonshine to set a pile of jack-o'-lanterns on fire.

"Thank god," she said when she saw me.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I can't help it."

"I know, she said, lighting a match. The snake was twining up my neck, into my hair.

"What do you think?" I asked. "Jesse and Belle?"

"Bonnie and Clyde," she said, and she tossed the match and the pumpkins went up.

I take a corner fast, nearly smash us into a rock outcropping. The van teeters. We're headed due west, ready to ditch the cops at the next bend. They've got the faster cars, but we've got the guts and the stolen vehicle. We'll drive through flames before we surrender.

The landscape flashes by, bumpy and indifferent.

"Almost there," I say aloud. Life would be so different if we did what we were supposed to, I think. It would be so goddamn easy to be nothing.

"We'll steal everything," Thea told me last week. "Church bells, jet engines, you name it. We'll take a whole damn circus. We'll steal the elephants."

I grinned.

"We'll do all that and more, baby."

And now that we've started, who'll stop us? We have pills for fainting. We have pills for disobeying gravity. Around 5 a.m. we held up a donut shop, and the sack sits greasy on the dashboard between us.

In the passenger seat, Thea turns to me.

"You know, we might be different from Bess," she says.

I hear the far-off whine of the sirens growing fainter. Our bend is coming up.

"We might get sick of each other," she adds.

I aim the van between a gap in the rocks and brace myself.

"It's possible," I say, but I doubt it. I, Cleopatra Marlingspike, will have a life that walks the fine line between danger and death, the only kind of life there really is, or else I will fly an airplane straight into the heart of the sun. I will have absurd graffiti, more proclamations shouted blindly into the night: *I loved this person! Death will not get me yet!* I'll have wind, dirtiness, movies, drugs. I'll drive recklessly all night and catch knives in my teeth and worship inferior gods. I'll take without asking, do without permission, be Anne and Bonnie and Patty and Marm, be always and forever surprised, thievery without end, outlaws till it all goes up in flames.

"We might get caught," Thea adds.

I floor the accelerator and tell her, shouting over the deep engine roar beneath us, that that place is still out of sight and a long way off.

CHAPTER 4

HOLD SHIFT TO RUN

Up the hill, and into the trees, and over the just-cut grass, and faster, faster, onto the trail, and past the buckthorn, and through the mud from yesterday's rain, and around the thicket where the celandines grow, and faster still, faster between the swarms of bugs, past the pond where your biology class took field trips last year, past the meadow with the high yellow weeds, past the gravel patch where the stoners go to smoke after school, and over the sandy place where the pine needles collect, and through the cramps and muscle fatigue, through the shitty old socks you knew you should have thrown away, through that old familiar I'm-back-again twinge in your left heel, through the whole nine-acre forest and up to the finish line where Coach stands watching with a timer in her hand and a *holy shit* look on her face: You run.

When you finish the course, you collapse on the ground. It's August and preseason and you're sweating so much it might as well be rain, but three months from now you'll be shivering beneath four layers of Under Armour and puffing your breath to keep the snow out of your eyes, so you'll take it, this season of sun and flies and headachy dehydration.

To your right, Kass Loraine comes in breathing like a dying elephant, three minutes over your time and sounding like he's going to hurl. The others are close behind, first the veterans with their creaky-hinge knees, then the middle-of-the-packers, and finally some puny freshmen with their hands on their knees, gasping like fish, thinking *what on god's green earth did I get myself into*.

You lie on the ground with grass tickling your face while Coach stands over you yelling *walk it off Klusacek you've still got cool downs,* but everyone knows she's not making you do

anything for the rest of the afternoon. You've beaten last season's best time, and it's only the first day of practice.

In a nearby city, a fourth grade savant works with glue, wire, violin strings, tapestry thread, clay. When he paints, his parents stretch his canvases because his arms are too small. At auction, his work goes for thousands.

Two counties over, a blind kid is teaching himself Sanskrit and decorating his wheelchair for prom. At the southern end of a northern island, a seventeen year old is compiling the world's foremost treatise on spiny shell oysters. All across the country, children are painting and singing and shot-putting and researching viruses and writing poetry and designing functional rocket ships.

You started on varsity cross country in sixth grade and at the start of your junior year you're un-fucking-stoppable. You've been captain since you were in eighth grade and All-State every year since you were a freshman and this season the national championship's in the bag.

At the first race of the year you blow by everyone, playing it off like you're not even trying but secretly busting your ass because you want to see the official's jaw drop when he checks his stopwatch and you want to hear the crowd yell like maniacs and you want to do your obligatory little hundred-meter victory trot while all the other runners are just clearing the treeline.

After the race, a reporter from the local TV station comes over to interview you, the fuzzy microphone in your face and *tell us what it's like, Nathan*.

Because you've never taken benzos or Quaaludes or even a bong hit, you can't describe the blissed-out weightlessness you get when you run. Because you haven't taken AP Psych, you're not familiar with concepts like "hyperfocus" or "flow state." Because your parents have banned them and because you'd rather be outside than hunched over a computer screen anyway, you don't know how to draw an analogy to a video game, how to say you're like the person with the controller, you're in charge of all the little movements this distant tiny character makes, press left to jump, press right to swim, hold shift to run, but you don't actually feel it yourself.

It's really great, you tell the reporter, and then you go throw up in the bushes.

The thing you want to know is, what hurts the most?

What's the most difficult?

What do you repeat to yourself over and over while you're doing your squats, plies, scales, sonnets? What keeps you from losing your mind?

And at the end of the day, where do you lose feeling?

A fourteen year old goes to the library and teaches himself everything there is to know about quantum mechanics. He corresponds with physicists across the country. He wakes in the middle of the night with shreds of equations in his mind, and he can't get back to sleep until he teases them out and stitches them back together. At school, his grades slip. His teachers take away his notebooks and tell him to concentrate. He writes his theorems in ink on his arms.

You run like a machine. You run like a maniac, like your only purpose in life is running. You run: jaw loose, shoulders down, arms swinging free, air rushing down your nose and through

your trachea and into your lungs, *hih-huh hih-huh hih-huh,* arms pumping, back relaxed, feet light as feathers, now in a long flat stretch, now approaching a hill, quads like pistons, *climb, climb you son-of-a-bitch,* heart thundering in your chest, heart kicking at your ribs like a rabbit, then reaching the top and breathing deep, the smell of grass tickling the back of your throat, trotting down the other side, hips loose, ankles loose, fighting the creep of fatigue up your calves and hams, sun slanting across your face, distant rain in long banks across the northern sky, the day young and glorious.

There's this girl, this field hockey player. Her name's Candy Kennedy and you first notice her hanging out in the gym after school when it's raining like crazy, absolutely pouring, and all the other sports are canceling but cross country's waiting, miserable, for Coach to show up and say *what's a little liquid sunshine, huh?* You see her clowning around with her friends, putting in her mouthguard upside down and pooching out her lips. You see her flirting with the senior quarterback. She doesn't look up when you go by.

You read about a twelve-year-old chef in Maryland with three Michelin stars. You'd like to ask him if it's true what they say about chefs losing all the hair on their hands, if he's ever sliced a finger so badly he needed stitches, and what he cooks when he's all alone and it's just him eating.

Your mother's best friend's daughter is fifteen, a year younger than you, and already going out for Miami, San Fran, ABT. A ballerina. When her mom comes to visit yours, they nudge-nudge-wink-wink suggest the two of you go out for ice cream.

Side by side, the girl is as tall as you and skinnier by about twenty pounds, which is saying something. At the ice cream parlor, neither of you order anything, but you do get to see a little kid drop his cone in the gravel. You're both on strict protein diets, and the thought of dairy makes your stomach curdle.

I haven't eaten dessert since I was thirteen, the dancer says.

I've never been to the ballet, you say.

You want to ask what her days are like, what are her equivalents of sprints, suicides, fartleks, pukers, but you're not sure what you'd do with the information. You sit in silence until she pulls a magazine from her purse.

It's my dad's, she says, showing it to you. I think it's repulsive.

The catalog is for lab animals, and together you pore over pages and pages of gerbils, inbred, and gerbils, outbred, and mice, mutant, and rabbits, transgenic, plus marble mollies, leopard frogs, tiger salamanders, duck embryos, goose embryos, and cage after cage after cage.

I ordered a box of hamsters once, she tells you. They died before they got to the house. Do you have any idea what twenty dead hamsters smell like?

To date: two sprained ankles, three pulled hamstrings, one case of plantar fasciitis, one case of athlete's foot, a broken toe, a double stress fracture, four straight seasons of shin splints, and one big juicy black eye, age fifteen, from running into a branch laughing at something Pete Schintz said.

At the other schools, you are the chosen one, the man to beat. Your name is invoked in pre-race strategy sessions, in rousing pep talks, in fervid whispered locker room prayers. When you buy

purple shoelaces, everyone buys purple shoelaces. You are an institution. You are shock and awe. There isn't a single runner in the tri-county area who doesn't know and hate and fear and admire you.

At your own school, you're a celebrity. Your name is on the morning announcements more days than not. You get free hall passes and extra study halls and half a dozen girls asking you to every school dance. The lunch ladies save the best helpings of chicken parm for you. You nearly fail an algebra quiz, and the teacher pulls you aside and changes the grade right in front of you.

Can't have you distracted for the big meet, he says, and winks.

In Waco, a ten-year-old pianist performs all twenty-seven of Chopin's Études. In September, she wins the Tokyo International and is diagnosed with tendinitis. In an interview, her parents say she holds her hands in a bucket of ice for an hour every night after practicing.

During sex ed the teacher partners everyone up for an activity. You get handed a single hardboiled egg and told to play catch with it, moving back a step with each throw. It's supposed to symbolize the difficulty and intimacy of parenthood, the teacher tells your class. Last period, one of the junior varsity guys apparently pegged his egg right at Marky Anderson and got a week of in-school suspension.

You're paired with Candy Kennedy. She's wearing her team uniform – away game in Greenville tonight – and there are grass stains on her shinguards. You drop the egg on the third toss.

I thought you were supposed to be good at sports, she says, and looks away.

#

You run on pavement. You run on grass. You run through woods, around ponds, over dry streambeds and rock. You run to the grocery store. You run to the movies. You run to your uncle's house out in the country and get chased by dogs for nearly a mile. You run through the nature preserve and when you accidentally step on a swallowtail its wing tissue clings to your treads.

You run trails strung with colored ribbons: red for left turns, yellow for right turns, blue for dead ahead. You run the city golf course in your bare feet when the evening air is gentle and the greens look like dark velvet. You run with rain pouring down your forehead and into your eyes, with wind whipping grit at your ankles and thighs. You run and your ears and nose blister with sunburn. You run during thunderstorms until your mother tells you absolutely not and then you jog tight maddening circles around the garage until the lightning fades and you go back out.

You run between the cafeteria and the classrooms and the water fountains and the locker room and when the physics teacher sticks his head out the door and says *no running in the halls* you skid to a stop and then you both crack up.

Sometimes you think the bus driver gets to your house early just so she can watch you sprint up the road.

You've decided – your guidance counselor and principal and future D1 coach and you have decided – that you're going to graduate a year early.

Such a great opportunity, says Mom.

You'll finally be around athletes of your caliber, says Coach.

You think *college* will help you get laid? Says Robby Matthis, rat-tailing you after practice.

In chemistry you learn that if you detach an electron from an atom and send it through a cloud chamber, you can see the track it leaves. Your teacher shows the class a video of the process and asks everyone why the alcohol vapor has to be supersaturated. Brad Purcell leans across the aisle between your desks and whispers, speaking of alcohol, Klusacek, we're making jungle juice at Candy's party on Friday and can you bring the pineapple?

You tell him you can't come. There's a meet and then a pre-states training session at Coach's, plus drinking after racing isn't a great combination. What kind of track do you leave when you run, you wonder, and is it measurable in any device?

The Alston Invitational. The Columbus Day 10K. The Trick or Trot. State regionals. State quarterfinals.

First place, first place, first place, first place.

A child actor debuts in a lakefront theater of wide renown. He is ten years old and already well versed in Shakespeare, Molière, Beckett, and Ibsen. It is rumored that he can learn two hundred lines an hour. His Faustus makes grown men weep. In his opening night as Tartuffe, the encores go on so long that taxi drivers fall asleep in their queue.

It happens on a Friday two weeks before Thanksgiving. It happens when you aren't even running, obviously, because if you *had* been running you would have been in the zone, you

would have been tuned in to every tiny twitch and twinge, you would have known your terrain. You would have been invincible.

It happens when Candy Kennedy calls your name. You've already passed her in the hall and you turn back to say hi, you turn preparing something witty and charming, but you're wearing new shoes, shoes you haven't broken in yet, and as you turn something catches and you twist too far. There's a popping noise, a sudden heat at the back of your leg, and it doesn't even hurt but en route to the floor you already know your Achilles is gone for good.

Surgery, the orthopedist says.

Twelve to fourteen weeks minimum, the physical therapist says.

Shit-bitch luck, Coach says.

The D1 school sends a get-well card and an autographed photo of Steve Prefontaine. The phone calls about course registration and scholarships quietly cease.

In a small town, a young artist begins a series of sculptures. She makes models in plaster and wax and she experiments with alloys. She begins to cast, and some of the sculptures are good and some are awful. She forgets to eat. She forgets to sleep. She loses ten pounds and stops answering the phone. She casts.

You see them in your codeine dreams, the trees tall as cathedrals. There's sunlight splashing down and colored flags tangling in all the branches, birch and ash and pine, and for days you've been lost in this forest. You run, and you run, and you turn left, then right, then right again, but you still can't reach the end of the trail.

You run. Your view is the sky through the branches and the dry twigs underfoot, and on either side of the path mushrooms ring the trees. You watch your feet, heel-ball-toe, heel-ball-toe, but they're not your feet anymore, they're giant and swollen like balloons, they lead you on and on in fumbling steps and they don't stop.

You run. You vault a creek, and your lungs feel like iron, and your legs strain as you approach a hill.

You run. You begin to climb and your feet are slipping on loose shale and the top isn't getting any closer, it's fading like a mirage. You should be going faster than this, you should be going fast, fast, fast, and so you lower your head and dig in your feet and think, if you can just make it a little farther, just a tiny, tiny bit farther, you'll finally see it, you'll finally get a good look at what it's all been leading to.

CHAPTER 5

A QUIET PILGRIMAGE TO EVERY LAST RUINED SAINT

We meet throwing rocks at the Shkola 837, and right away I know we'll be friends. Zhivka has a terrible overhand but an angry set to her jaw that makes me step back and watch. A stone sails whitely through the air and connects with glass, and then she goes for another. The window shatters. We're thirteen years old, artists in the making. Failure running through our lives like a rotted thread.

We become inseparable almost immediately. We break into peasants' gardens and climb the black cherry trees to shake down handfuls of fruit. We walk past the Shkola 837 and smell the sharp fumes of paint wafting out and assure ourselves that we're not jealous, not even a little. We run half-feral through the streets, and we make plans to start our own studios and art schools. We may have been born into shit, but we won't stay here forever.

This is Spasyavane: grim housing blocks, metal factories and highways that sling around mountains toward nowhere in particular. We grow up surrounded by broken glass and concrete, and we hardly know how much we've been cheated. Our parents work in the factories or they sell cigarettes and prepaid phones in the corner stores or else they drive to the next gray city and work at vague government posts, and at night they come home and fill the hallways with the blue tick of television.

Not Zhivka and me. We're going to make it out. We're dreaming of our first masterpieces because there's nothing else to dream of. Growing up in Spasyavane, we need no prophets to tell us the odds against us. Our home lives are disasters, and this is no place for

miracles, but we are not going to be like these other people. She is going to be a painter and I am going to be a woodworker, and together we will become famous.

Before Zhivka, I know nothing about art. I've read instruction manuals and made clumsy pipes and crooked hairbrushes; I've stumbled blindly through projects, chisels in hand. On unlucky days when my father brings me to church with his red handprint still on my face, I sit in the pew with hot blood sliding between my teeth and commit the manuals to memory. The basic dovetail joint consists of the flared tails and the slender pins, *Confiteor Deo omnipotenti, istis Sanctis et omnibus Sanctis,* once properly constructed, the dovetail cannot be twisted or racked or destroyed except by fire.

With Zhivka by my side, I learn how to be an artist. I begin to read about woodworkers, and I pin the pictures of famous works to the wall above my bed at home. We take ideas and spend hours pulling them apart like orange pith. I begin to consider pieces of wood as stories and start unlocking abstract shapes within them. I wear my hair long over my eyes and spend all my time arguing about form and function.

She teaches me to steal bent hammers and chisels from the scrap heap behind the Shkola 837 and smuggle them home under my jacket. She lives with her grandmother in a single room in Block 6, where she lets me keep my tools under her bed. She doesn't ask questions about my black eyes, so I don't ask questions about her parents: Who are they and where have they gone? Sometimes your father is a sadist, sometimes he's a holy bastard, sometimes he's poisoned by the state, and it is never, ever wise to ask too many questions.

Fourteen years old. Zhivka makes me pose nude for a painting.

Not like that, she says. I just want to study you.

I take off my clothes, and she folds them and places them on the ground. Her grandmother is out on a weekly walk with the baker's widow, the bricklayer's widow; everyone in this town is either widowed or widowing, and Block 6 is cool and quiet. I lie down on the bed.

Move your arm, she says. I do. I've learned everything I know about painting from watching Zhivka. She scavenges old canvases and brushes from the garbage behind the art school and scrapes the dried paint off the palettes and mixes her own pigments in margarine tubs. She makes an easel out of a broken chair and barters balls of wool and blackberry canes and beeswax in exchange for portraits of the local families.

She has a merciless stare, and when she turns it on me, I freeze. I am an object to be painted, I'm a shoe or a fish or a messy collection of lines. It doesn't matter if I'm shy or turned on or embarrassed; it doesn't matter. I am not fourteen, and I am not Sasho.

Her lips purse while she paints. She studies me, and I study all her little unconscious tics: the squinting, the palette held up to the light, the tip of her tongue poked out of her mouth. She is looking into me or through me or near me, and I feel like something laid out for sale, I feel limp and shining and new and remade.

This is my first time being part of a painting, but it's Zhivka's hundredth or thousandth. She makes portraits of everyone she comes across: Dead Gregory, the local farmer who everyone says has died no fewer than five times; and the beggar woman in the doorway of the abandoned train depot; the drunk grabbing his crotch outside Sveti Nikola; a neighbor with eleven children; a white cat with six toes.

After she finishes my portrait, she won't let me see it.

Before her, I didn't know anything else existed.

#

We're different in all the little ways. I'm constantly nicking myself with the chisels, little wedges of pain that rise up all day long. She has a certain dark poise, and when she searches for the best light in the room, I want to stop everything and watch her. When we work, shavings of conversation curl and fall between us.

Have you seen the brush I was—

How do you think this would—

What if I—

I live for the hours I can escape to Zhivka's apartment. At home, my father measures my mother's skirt hems and puts on black gloves when he beats her in order to hide the blood. He's memorized every word of the Eucharistic liturgy, and he knows how to choke with exacting pressure. I carry fury with me like a small knot.

I hate my name because it's his name, too, and I toy with changing it—Boyko, Zlatan, Lazar—until Zhivka brushes my hair behind my ears with her fingertips, murmurs Sasho, Sasho, don't let him get to you, don't give him any power. Sometimes we try on pseudonyms like new clothes. She'll be the famous Sofia Abadjiev, and I'll be Vlado the Magnificent. We're barely teenagers, and already we feel eternal.

We have a morbid curiosity, Zhivka and I. We sit in the stairwell of Block 6 and smoke cigarette butts we find on the sidewalk and trade tales of heretical artists who had their hands nailed to their tables or their eyelids sewn shut. We wonder aloud what it would feel like. Zhivka describes the blood, and there is just so much of it. We can hardly see for all the smoke we're making.

At the end of the year we both drop out of school. My mother, in her quiet, protective ways, can't make my father send me to the Shkola 837, but she manages to find me an apprenticeship with a carpenter who lives nearby, and my father allows it, just. If the patron saint of forced silence existed, if he had a shrine in our house, he'd take up every inch of available space and overflow into the street.

In the mornings I stand at the cold tap and wash away my plans of rocking chairs and cuckoo clocks and cabinets with secret drawers. Then I go across the street and up into the small space that smells of pickled fish to sweep floors, sharpen chisels, gouge ten thousand tiny triangles into ugly pine boards and learn to be an apprentice.

Zhivka stays home. She does the cooking and the washing and rubs salve into her grandmother's arthritic joints. When the old woman is snoring in bed we go out to the hallway and whisper what we're going to do when we're famous.

The carpenter, Anastas, turns out to be a drunk and a crook but not a bad teacher. At night I reread the pages of Grandfather's woodworking manual until they begin to fray and fall apart.

I make a box with crooked hinges. I make a set of spoons. I learn how to saw curves, and I try my first jigsaw puzzle.

It looks like dog puke, Zhivka says.

We exist, clumsy, raw, swigging stolen rakia. We've always fought, but now our words start to draw blood. We fight like psychopaths. We fight like broke-ass boxers on a losing streak. We read each other's futures in our palms, faces so close our breath tickles the skin. We've known each other for two years, and we still haven't figured out if we're in love or not.

Walking past the park where the drunks and the half-feral dogs sleep. Making complicated plans to run away to the city and see what the real artists are doing, get to the raw nerve of culture where everything important happens. We go down to the oily river and watch the ships moor and unmoor, and our hearts are gypsies and whores, and we almost never touch.

In July we both turn sixteen. On the night before my birthday we wait until our houses are quiet. We sneak out and take the little winding lanes behind the peasants' houses to the base of the Kamaka. We have blankets and a flask of rakia, and we are going to the top of the mountain to watch the stars jitter across the sky. We are going to the top of the mountain to be pushed to the breaking point.

The trail is dark, and we're pretending not to be scared. Our voices are too loud for the black woods, but we're arguing anyway, fighting about art school, and for the hundredth time I'm saying it's a waste of time, and for the hundredth time Zhivka is saying she needs it to make connections. Neither of us is saying what we're really talking about.

We walk, and the honeysuckle clutches at our ankles. Our voices are full of night-speak, grandiose arguments and vulnerabilities. When we finally get to the overlook, we're holding hands, all our fighting used up. It's a cloudless night, and all of Spasyavane's streetlights are too far away to ruin the mood. We watch a few bright cars weave through the streets and I feel more luminous than the entire ruined city.

From here it's a few short steps to losing our virginities. We spread out the blanket. We drink the rakia. I bend to kiss her, and our teeth bump and draw blood. We are reckless and ready for nothing.

#

The next week she announces she's taking a vow of chastity.

For my work, she explains.

It's nothing personal, she adds.

She starts painting the icons in August, and by St. Bruno's Day she's mastered them. She reads long, moldy books, and her lips move soundlessly over the ancient words as her fingers trace the old-story saints. Their pictures are flat and unmoving, and they stare through dead white eyes; their halos are gold and wafer-flat. She paints them all, the lesser holy men, the Old Testament prophets and patriarchs, the evangelists, archangels and apostles.

She spends eight, ten hours on them every day. For the first time, she doesn't tell me what she's doing, and she doesn't ask for advice. I watch her out of the corner of my eye, the thin washes of brighter color and the masturbatory little brush strokes, around and around on each saint's creamy skin. There is white gesso on her fingertips and propolis coating her fingernails.

I am partly to blame. She uses terms I don't recognize, "skelion" and "first flesh," and I don't interrupt to ask what she's talking about. I grind the red clay for her liquid bole and bring the animal glue myself. When she's gilding she won't let me into the room.

If you breathe too hard you'll blow away the gold leaf, she says.

This new silence between us is thick and unyielding, but I keep helping her. After her paintings finish curing, I'm the one who applies the warm linseed oil. I'm the one who cuts and sands the poplar boards for the paintings. I'm the one who does everything, who can't seem to stop.

At home I drift between monotony and terror. Here's the thing: life can be mostly fine, months of peace and quiet, but what you'll remember is still the thirty seconds with your hand

held to the burner. My father allows the carpentry apprenticeship except on the days he doesn't, and then it's pain and lectures and punishment until it seems like even my own future is nonnegotiable to me.

Anastas receives a commission to replace the rotting pews in a church in Spasyavane's old quarter, so I start spending long days away from home. I fetch tools and record measurements in front of an altar draped with a brittle froth of lace. Sometimes Zhivka comes by to watch me work, to watch the old women gibbering their prayers in front of the icons, and Anastas elbows me in the ribs and grins. The air is stale; the church's icons are illuminated by hundreds of candles burning thin and yellow as witches' fingers, candles that burn before each saint in tarnished holders and jelly jars and old bottles of baby formula. I can't understand why she would want *more* of this.

Everything's complicated, she tells me. She's painting more than ever, and she still won't show me anything she's working on. She writes long letters to faraway artists and famous painters, people she's never met. When I confront her, she throws a tube of phthalo blue at my head.

It's always everything, it's always complicated.

I start sleeping on her floor. I fall asleep while she's painting and wake up with her still at the easel. She tells me I have nightmares, that I cry out in my sleep, but I don't believe her. In dreams we are happy together; we hold hands and have pet names, our spines dance and tangle in electricity, and everything we say is holy—but then in dreams we are different people.

Awake, we tear into each other worse than ever. She says she loves me. She says she's going to kill me if I don't stop leaving sawdust on the floor. I tell her she's a fraud and a hack. I call her a stubborn lunatic bitch; she should stop worshiping those shriveled-up saints; and she

tells me everyone worships something. I have nothing to say to that, but the truth is on the tip of my tongue.

You, I think. *You, you, you. It's always you.*

One morning I wake up and find her on the floor next to me, her head cradled against the curve of my hip. If life consisted of only these tiny shards and nothing more, I think, I might almost be happy.

When she wakes up, she teaches me how to apply gilt. Bend down to your bench and breathe onto the red clay. Smooth the gold leaf onto the water from your lungs. In the cool morning air you'll add layers and layers, and after a few hours you can burnish the leaf to a high glow. In the meantime, you sit and bicker, and you wonder if this is a love story or a war.

Wait for the few thin molecules to adhere. Wait for luck.

In May it begins.

They appear nailed to telephone poles and propped against doorsteps and wedged between crates of potatoes and carrots at the bodegas. They appear in the old style, flat-faced and done in dull gold, expressionless, draped in olives, browns, and reds. They are the church's saints, exquisitely painted, and there is something hideously wrong with all of them.

They weep blood, or they have two heads and spikes protrude from their shoulders. They are dead and rotting, lolling tongues the color of fish bellies. They have patchy beards, and bones show through their skin, and their sores are abscessing. They can't even save themselves.

The patron saint of cigarette butts: grinning down from its lamppost with yellowed skin and smoker's teeth.

The patron saint of broken accordions: weeping dusty tears over the doorway of the defunct sheet-music factory.

The patron saint of tampon applicators, serene and bloody with a tangle of white cotton strings dangling from her outstretched hands.

The patron saints of fallen acrobats, alleyway abortions, inoperable cataracts.

What the fuck, I say to Zhivka. I know they're hers the same way I know her eyes and her voice and her hands are hers. What is this supposed to mean? I ask.

But she isn't explaining anything.

That summer Anastas is hired to restore a state official's mansion, and I can numb my feelings with work. There's so much crumbling and decay in the mansion that some of the Shkola 837 students are hired as well. We get to know each other around the whine of the saws, and I start taking cheap bottles of slivova out to the fields with them after work. I show some of my sculptures to the carpentry girls in their black jeans and spiked boots, and they coo over my work and caress the pieces with blunt fingers. When I kiss them they taste like ash. They are warm and fast-moving under my hands, and when I smell their sweat and shampoo I miss Zhivka even more.

She is still painting. The patron saint of hand soap. The patron saint of bar stools. The patron saints of fish heads and dirty cowards.

The people of Spasyavane are outraged, and the priests are apoplectic. At home, my father rages and wonders why the city doesn't take down the blasphemous work, but the saints are bolted to walls or perched too high to remove without ladders, so they stay and preside over us all. When I can't sleep I go out and smoke cigarettes and walk their routes, a quiet pilgrimage to every last ruined saint, and I feel Zhivka's absence like a knife in my side.

We sleep together only once more that entire summer. It's on an aching blue night in June when her grandmother is out and we're feeling restless in our skin.The whole concrete city sings to us. We are young, and we might as well fuck this one up right. Afterward we lie staring at opposite walls, and I know she is keeping something from me, she is holding something just out of sight, and it is more than a handful of perverse saints, and it may just ruin us.

I build a bookshelf. I build a table. I carve a set of Christmas ornaments, and I save up the money I earn running errands for Anastas and slave over a pair of mahogany bracelets for Zhivka but then don't give them to her.

I veer surreal. I make complicated little sculptures for my father's noonday anger, my mother's smooth calm, the grandmother and her aged cadre of widows. Zhivka is still making saints, and I will not do it, I will not worship, I will make wickedness instead.

That summer, I carve trespasses of the flesh and of the mind. I carve small abstract tortured shapes. I don't tell Zhivka what I'm doing, and she doesn't ask. I carve the sin of secrecy. The sin of lust. The sin of artistic delusion. I carve and carve, and I find that if I'm lucky for a few hours I can disappear from myself altogether.

This is how we fall apart:

First there is the acceptance letter, crisp and congratulatory.

Then there are Zhivka's explanations, none of them reassuring. This is what the saints were for. I was afraid you would persuade me not to do it. The capital isn't really so far away. We'll visit each other all the time.

Lastly there is my blind madness, which comes over me like something white and liquid. I tear her apartment open and find the art school essays folded under a shawl in the closet, and I read them, every last word.

All I want is a place away from here, she's written. *All I want is somewhere to do my work.*

The next day I come and collect all my tools from her apartment. I don't speak to her for the rest of the month. By the time I come around and offer to help her pack, it's too late. The school year is starting, and then she's gone.

For the first three months, Spasyavane goes on without her, and I don't. She is gone, and I am still here. She is learning to paint masterpieces, and I am five hundred miles away from the only person I ever cared about. She is a deserter; I am the soldier too dumb to follow suit.

No one else seems to notice she's gone, but I mourn enough for the entire city. I cut my hair and stop eating. I burn the only painting she ever gave me, a tiny watercolor of the Kamaka. Weeks of rage and sadness. Weeks spent dragging myself around like a rabbit with a broken leg. I've been hit, stabbed and thrown down stairs, but this is something deeper, a wound I can't get to.

This is fucking bullshit.

Every morning on my way to work I pass the patron saint of lost foragers. I look at him on his telephone pole, hair tangled and eyes wide, bloody scratches on his cheeks. He looks back at me, and I don't know who pities whom more. At night I come home silent and aching and I can't bring myself to say her name.

Zhivka writes me letters. She's found a place to live. She's doing well in school. The other students are amateurs, dilettantes who paint icons with crooked noses, too-big heads, spotted vestments and catawampus eyes. She's become friends with the carpenters who supply the school with poplar boards and frames, and they all say her talent is once in a lifetime.

They're nothing like you, she writes.

My father's fury at my haircut and black clothes and moodiness is nothing compared to what happens when he finds my sin sculptures. Without Zhivka's room to hide them in, they've overflowed my closet and piled up on the floor next to my bed. I'm not sure what makes me keep carving them, but I can't seem to stop: the sin of selfishness and the sin of wishing ill for a friend and the sin of desperate masturbation and just throwing love away like a rag.

My father's disgust is clear, but for once it does not frighten me. When he calls me a godless child, I tell him to go fuck himself and all his holy anger, and I hit him with a clean uppercut that leaves my knuckles ringing; then I walk out of my house for good.

I borrow money from Anastas, empty my wallet and rent a tiny studio above a liquor store. I cobble together a collection of used rasps and handsaws and set up a cot behind my workbench. I wake up every morning with sawdust in my hair.

I don't know how to fix myself, so I dive into my work. I borrow a scrollsaw and learn inlay and marquetry. I make a clock and a chessboard. I make more clocks. Jewelry boxes. A set of candlesticks. By the time Zhivka finishes her first semester, I've started getting commissions.

Winter drags on. The work keeps coming in, both in Spasyavane and in nearby cities. I come home to my studio with money in my pockets and hold long, elaborate arguments with the air. I'm twenty pounds thinner, and my gums bleed on and off for weeks. I lock myself in my

room and destroy the door and the better part of the walls. I horrify myself with the thought that I'm turning into my father.

Spring, and the earth unclenches itself. The fruit trees begin to flower, and a spray of color washes over the bare branches. Zhivka's letters have been dwindling for weeks, and when they finally stop coming I realize I've been waiting six months for her to appear in my doorway.

No more.

I find her in a rented room in the Marinov ghetto. The capital center is bright and gleaming, but the buildings out here are made of scabrous concrete, and their addresses are spray-painted on the doors. All I can think is, she escaped Spasyavane to come to this?

Inside, someone is shouting down the hall. The ceiling is brown from rainwater. When Zhivka answers the door, her eyes are dull and her hair is long and lank. Her clavicle looks like it could crumble into dust. She stands in the center of the room, folds her arms across her chest and tells me I can't stay. She has on a dirty smock, and there is paint tracked across the floor and dried in her braids. Stacked against all the walls are canvases stretching, canvases curing. Everywhere I look: canvases.

The rest of the apartment is only four walls and the ceiling, brown with rainwater. There's no furniture, just a chair, some Sternos and a ratty nest of blankets on the floor. She's been living like this all year, she tells me.

There is a sweet whiff of opiates and decay on her breath. Her voice has no bite to it, and when she tells me to leave a second time, she's really asking what took me so long.

We stand side by side, skeletons with broken, crooked hearts.

Sasho, she says. I've seen such incredible things.

Then we slide to the floor and sit there in the clutter of paintings. She murmurs into my shoulder, and I comb the color from her hair and tell her I know. In the whole long ragged history of our country, there's never been anything quite like us.

Listen: We are no role models. Tomorrow we'll wake up and fight. Tomorrow we'll shout at each other until the landlord has to be called. She'll call me a liar and I'll call her a thief, and we'll get drunk and laugh and cry and generally bring out the worst in each other, we perverse muses. What else can we do? We each fashion our own escapes, rickety things made of wood and paint and string and hope, and when the dust settles we live with what is left and are made new, saints of nothing but ourselves.

CHAPTER 6

THE BIRD IS A SYSTEM

So you weren't exactly where you thought you'd be.

That was okay. Things could still work out.

Were you not your father's daughter? Your mother's daughter? Had they not instilled in you an appreciation for perseverance, stick-to-it-ness, whatever you wanted to call it? Were you not, in your earlier slash more impressionable years, known for your ability to Thrive Under Pressure?

Things were almost definitely going to work out.

Take, for instance, this place. There were things to like about this place. The way Robert and Roberta treated you like family, for example. The way, whenever someone commented on one of your photos, like, *what is that place? Lol,* you could honestly answer by saying you were Following a Nontraditional Path.

So this was not exactly where you'd pictured yourself, post-graduation. To be fair, a failing owl sanctuary in rural North Carolina was probably not where *anyone* pictured themselves. You just had to keep an Open Mind, was all.

And when that Open Mind got a little less open after four months of taking care of de-winged slash elderly slash beakless owls, well, you just had to keep focusing on the little things. For instance, the textbook. You were *learning* things from the textbook. *Owl Care for Amateur Ornithologists*—who would have guessed you'd end up with something like this?

Life was truly full of Little Surprises.

Maybe you didn't love the owls like Milo did. So what? Milo was a True Hippie, one of those forty-something guys who wore hemp sandals and showered twice a week, tops. Technically your supervisor, he mostly just walked around saying things like, Are You Living Your Best Life? Or, The Best Present is to Be Present. What you wanted to tell him was that your own Best Life wasn't sewing toy mice out of old shirts and teasing the birds with them. It wasn't picking katydids out of the laurel bushes and hand-feeding them to Héloïse, the barn owl with the beatific white face.

The thing was, it was healthy to have some sort of work-life boundaries. More than once, you'd walked in on Milo deep in conversation with an actual owl. He treated them like something between an oracle and a pet. Was it going to rain? Should he add clove oil to the homemade weed killer? He sometimes stayed up all night worrying over the sick owls, watching them breathe. He had had a dozen jobs in as many years and didn't seem bothered by anything.

Which, you did not want to be judgmental. You had your own issues. Worrying that you didn't have a life plan, for example. Worrying that you'd wasted the best part of your teens working at an aquarium gift shop, where grim parents shepherded squalling children past bins of plastic whales and sting rays. That you were pushing twenty-three and still hadn't found your Own Personal Dream.

As far as you knew, Milo didn't have any of those worries. Milo was great at Going with the Flow. In playful moods, he messed with the tour groups. He made up owl species, lying about their origins and their diets.

The coyote-tail owl eats mainly shrimp, he told a family from Wisconsin.

The speckled Northern whompus is afraid of pillows and sheets, he told a troop of sullen-looking Girl Scouts.

Earlier that morning, as he was packing to leave with Robert and Roberta, he'd given you a long, soulful look. He was full of those.

Look after the place, he said, as if he was planning to be gone for months and not days. And, you know, try to enjoy yourself. Get into the spirit of things.

You would, you said.

You were trying.

You watched the van go, waving as they pulled out of the driveway. From the dirt patch in front of the bunkhouse, you could see the sanctuary's nets rising through the trees: vast, intricate, ghostly. You could see the metal scaffolding reaching up into the hot sky and down into the pine needles, which released a sweet, sickly smell as they baked in the sun. Closer up, you could see its shit-streaked floor, its cheap repairs, its arching interior filled with sick and broken birds of prey.

It was the height of summer, and the air was hot and oppressive. You could hear the birds going to sleep inside the giant, mesh-draped aviary. There were the Eastern screech-owls looking wooly on their perches. There were Antony and Cleopatra, the boreal owls, and Vronsky, the great horned owl with the ridiculous ear tufts. Higher up, in the trees, the barn owls shrieked like little goblins.

Most of the owls weren't so healthy. Milo said even the well ones only lived to be five or ten years old, but you were pretty sure he was making that up, too. At least once a week, you had nightmares of owls falling out of the sky and landing at your feet with a feathery thump, dead.

But you weren't supposed to be a natural at this kind of thing, okay?

You were a college dropout. *Community* college, no less. You didn't have to be good at everything you tried.

Like, last month, when that old tourist had put out her hand and touched the wire mesh gingerly, as if she expected it to electrocute her, and asked if there was really supposed to be so much poop everywhere.

A troubling amount of fecal matter, was what the comment card said.

And now it had been six months, and you were alone with the owls, and nothing was what you hoped. When you'd first arrived at the sanctuary, it had been the morning after an ice storm. The sun was shining, the sky an eye-watering blue. Coated in ice, the mesh nets of the aviary had glistened like they were made of cut glass. Everything shone; everything was brittle and new.

The hopefulness had lasted all of fifteen minutes—the length of your official training—and then you were enlisted to help Milo thaw the branches in the aviary with a hair dryer and an extension cord.

What you needed now was for something, anything, to change. For the universe to give you a chance. To offer you a Helping Hand.

And then, for once in your life, it did.

At the end of the driveway, emerging from a car you'd never seen before, was Felicity.

Felicity, your ex-girlfriend.

Felicity of the Doc Martens and tattoos. Of the erratic hairstyles and near-pathological wanderlust.

Felicity coming up the driveway with a suitcase in her hand.

The first thing she said was, You didn't tell me you'd left the *planet*. Then she was hugging you, her bony arms around your neck. The familiar smells of bubblegum and cigarettes wafted up from her clothes.

What are you doing here? You managed to say.

She stepped back, shrugged.

Aren't you happy to see me?

You stared at her, speechless.

No offense, she went on, but I think you highlighted the potential rather than the actuality of the place.

She did a slow revolution where she stood. Dirt patch, trees, aviary. Bunkhouse with peeling paint, garden patch full of weeds, rusted-out old pickup truck.

It's a little rough, you admitted.

She said, *a little?*

Last time I talked to you, you were in Mexico City, you said. Like, three days ago.

She shrugged.

I got on a plane. I was bored.

Bored, you thought. That sounded about right. You remembered her making a similar statement at the aquarium gift shop right before she left. That was the way Felicity worked, disappearing for six months at a time and then showing up with a new girlfriend or boyfriend or in Croatia or San Bernardino or, once in a while, on your doorstep.

Besides, she added, you said you were going to be alone and I thought you could use the company. I wanted to see what your life was like now.

And? You said. What do you think?

What do I think? She said. What I think is what are you *doing* here? Owls? Really? You couldn't even stand the animals at the aquarium. And they didn't shit on everything.

Felicity was right. You were not a Big Fan of animals. Did not find them particularly charming. Could not offer much of a comeback at all.

It's only temporary, you said. I'm just trying to figure things out, you know?

She looked skeptical.

Does the figuring out have to happen *here*?

Come on, you said helplessly. Let's get in the shade.

You crossed the yard and sat on the bunkhouse steps. Felicity dropped her suitcase on the ground—heavy sound of bottles clinking together—and joined you.

Things with me are going well, she said. Really, really well.

From her shorts pocket, she pulled an over-exposed photograph of blurs and lines. The image looked like it had been smeared across the film. You could vaguely make out the shape of a key in one corner, a children's action figure in another, but that was all.

This is Martín's, she said. He has this gorgeous studio right in Condesa. Women visit him all day and bring him things for his still lifes, flowers and keys and string bags and, this one time, a real human skull, I shit you not.

She took out some more photographs. These ones were of sweaty, doughy people, pale men looking awkward in their button-downs and women clutching their purses too tightly. They were arrayed in front of a variety of monuments, fountains, and colorful market stalls.

These are mine, she said. I take photographs of tourists for money.

Since when? You asked.

She shrugged. Since the city's expensive. Since I don't like asking Martín for money.

There was a silence. Then, as if she could read your mind, she added, It's not really that often. I've only sold a handful of them. Most of the time we're too busy going to gallery openings and dinner parties. We really love the city. It has such *personality,* you know?

You looked around you. Behind the bunkhouse's torn screen door was a room full of duct-taped sneakers, of dirty laundry, of unread ornithology books covered in dark, greasy dust.

Yeah, you said. I know what you mean.

Felicity put the photographs back in her pocket. Something unreadable passed over her face.

But, you know, she went on. It's too hot in the city. She was frowning, fidgeting with the hem of her dress. Plus there are blackouts right now, so there's sort of no power? And Martín turned the entire apartment into a darkroom and I can't find any of my things.

You tried to imagine it: the black apartment with the red lights, and Felicity moving through it, ghostly and unhappy. Baths of developing fluid everywhere. Drying photographs strung up in the doorways.

Well, you said, I guess it's okay if you stay a day or two. But just until Milo and the owners get back, okay? You can't get too comfortable.

Out in the aviary, a single owl screeched and wailed. Felicity was humming a song.

Nothing bad ever happens to us, it went, *except our own lives.*

Feeding time was not great. Let's get that out of the way. Feeding time was probably one of the very least great things about the sanctuary.

It did not feel Personally Fulfilling to sling frozen carcasses from a wheelbarrow onto various parts of the sanctuary floor that Robert and Roberta had marked with spray paint. It did

not feel Personally Fulfilling to clean up the skeletons once they were more or less picked clean and dump them in the grassy canyon beyond the sanctuary.

But, as various adults and well intentioned relatives would have you remember, this was all part of Building Character.

Feeding time was usually not your responsibility. It was only your job since Robert and Roberta were driving across the country to rescue two dozen owls from that failing sanctuary in Colorado. Normally you would be doing things like passing out brochures at the mall or designing a new visitor's guide for the tourists who almost never came to visit. Normally Milo would be there to help, too, but Robert and Roberta wanted him to help drive the van.

Works Well Without Supervision, was what you could put on your resume.

Or maybe, Handles Adversity with Aplomb.

Back in the bunkhouse, Felicity was already making herself at home. You'd spent the afternoon catching up, eating cheese and bologna sandwiches that you somehow couldn't imagine anyone eating in Mexico City. When you left her, she was lying on Milo's bed, her hair plastered to her forehead in the sticky heat. She hadn't come out and said it, but you could tell she was second-guessing her decision to come here.

And maybe she was right. Maybe the point was instead to get yourself into situations that gave you the opportunity to say *my lover* about a 45-year-old Mexican artist who'd recently been featured in *GQ*.

Who knew? Maybe you would meet your own rich lover. Maybe she would fly you to Acapulco, or Vienna, or Bali. You might meet a kind stranger who offered you a lucrative job at his successful startup. You might end up working in an impossibly chic boutique, or else an

office with floor to ceiling windows and a great view of a skyline. The point was, Anything Could Happen.

You wound along the trail with your wheelbarrow, unloading sad little piles of frozen voles and squirrels. True, this was not something you'd ever imagined being an expert at. But, also true, there were certain apocalyptic scenarios in which it could become a valuable skill.

That was approximately the right attitude, you thought.

At the southernmost feeding point, you came across the remnants of a whole deer. This was the part of the sanctuary where the strongest, healthiest birds lived, and they'd torn the carcass—not frozen but fresh, a gift from a neighbor who'd hit it with his car—into gruesome pink confetti. Scattered around it were the remains of what you remembered to be rabbits, which, after they'd been there a few days, had mostly dissolved into little heaps of ribcages and dust. The smell stopped bothering you early on, but you still couldn't keep from peering at them, from searching out what new and fascinating forms the rot had taken.

There was a metaphor in that, you thought.

You started to push the wheelbarrow faster. You could picture Felicity back at the bunkhouse, a tequila bottle in hand. Sooner or later, you would end up entertaining her; it was just a question of what form the entertainment would take, and when, and how much trouble it would get you in.

You were still wondering when you rounded the last bend and came across it.

An owl on the ground.

Huddled in the dirt with a hard knobbly bulge in its neck. Its *crop*.

Was this normal owl behavior?

You shuffled closer to the owl. You tried to think what to do. What Milo would do. The owl—you thought it was named Casanova, or maybe it was the Count of Monte Cristo (you'd failed English class, too)—was doing a sort of shivering thing, trying to retch in a not-good way.

Should you pick it up?

Should you leave it alone?

You paused on the path a few feet away. You were thinking about what Felicity would say if you brought the owl back with you. Something like, I had no idea you were so brave and kindhearted? No, probably more like, Oh my god, what is that thing doing here?

All around you, the evening insect sounds were beginning. Lightning bugs speckled the aviary. The other owls were all gearing up for the night, the best analogy for which was a few dozen monkeys all losing their minds at once.

Maybe the best choice was to do nothing. Didn't even the healthy owls seem sort of peaky, honestly? Didn't they have red-rimmed eyes and bedraggled, grubby feathers? From time to time, when money was short, hadn't Robert and Roberta been known to feed them chopped-up hotdogs?

You hesitated a moment longer. The aviary rustled faintly around you. Back at the bunkhouse, Felicity was waiting for you with God only knew what in mind.

In front of you, the owl blinked solemnly.

Later, after the sun had set and the air had gone flat and stagnant, you sat with Felicity on the bunkhouse roof. She'd turned up the music inside as high as it would go, and a hazy melody floated up and around you. The tequila bottle was half empty.

To sum up your evening: Peanut butter. Metamucil. Holding down Casanova with one hand. Applying mixture to beak region with the other. Getting thrashed by his struggling wings. Trying to see if he'd swallowed any of it. Repeat. Repeat.

Why don't you call a vet? Felicity had suggested, not knowing that you only got paid in a timely manner as long as there weren't extra bills.

And as long as an owl didn't die on your watch.

Hence the arms covered in bruises.

Hence the lack of Charitable Thoughts.

You were allowing yourself to feel your hatred of the place. How it grew with every hoot and screech. How it morphed and swelled and took on the proportions of the aviary, something gigantic rising through the trees.

Bitterness was seeping through your whole body, swelling your fingers and dripping out your eyeballs.

Felicity poured another drink for herself, then for you. She checked her phone again. You had the sense that things maybe weren't as good with Martín as she said. A few times that evening you'd caught her trying to call someone who didn't pick up and didn't pick up and didn't pick up. You knew you should ask her about it, but—bad person, bad person—you didn't.

How come you always know what it is you want, Fe? You asked instead. How do you always know what to do?

Do I? she said. I don't know. I just know when I don't want something.

You nudged a dead cicada from side to side with your toe. You could feel Felicity's eyes on you.

Why don't you go to one of those recruiter places? She said. Or one of those temp agencies? It can't be that complicated, can it?

I don't even know what I'd ask for, you said. *Hi, do you have any jobs for the catastrophically clueless?*

Well, what's the worst that can happen? She said.

You swallowed hard. The tequila was wreaking havoc on your stomach. All around you in the loud, humid night, you could feel the things you didn't know how to do or say collecting at your feet.

Casanova was getting worse.

You and Felicity had come to check on him at midnight and found him hunched on his branch, a limp, grey huddle. You could hear him feebly trying to disgorge the stuck bone from his crop. You consulted the textbook, wondering if this was call-the-vet serious or wait-and-see serious.

Being perpetually undernourished, you read, *the small bird is always only a few hours from death. When ill, it may need to be hand-fed with a mixture of raw meat scraps. Tweezers and hand puppets are useful for this task. Be cautious that the bird is not over-fed and over-watered. Under the wrong circumstances, the bird may drown while drinking.*

What the hell kind of book is this? Felicity asked. The two of you had brought a blanket into the aviary, and you were lying in the center of one of its grassy clearings. Felicity was still drinking. She reached out and pulled a feather from your hair. A barred owl sent a sonic shiver through the trees.

Do you hear that? Felicity said. It's like the owls are trying to tell us something.

You listened closely. It sounded like it always did, loud and urgent and chaotic. Your flashlight cast a narrow pool of light over the textbook pages. Felicity had produced a pack of cigarettes and was smoking them in proportion to how often she checked her phone.

Martín and I are going to buy our own gallery, she said. We're talking about it, I mean. We're going to exhibit our work side by side.

You nodded. You were thinking, tomorrow you'd call the vet, for sure.

Felicity finished one cigarette and lit another.

And he's going to introduce me to this great magazine editor, she said. I'm really excited. Martín's got all sorts of connections, you know?

You produced a smile of the right shape and size onto your face. You were thinking how, when you interviewed for the job at the owl sanctuary, Robert and Roberta had asked you about your Greatest Weakness. You'd thought about telling them how, at the aquarium, you used to get bored and drop bits of your lunch into the fish tanks all afternoon. You thought about telling them that you didn't care much for owls.

Your actual Greatest Weakness: you couldn't recognize opportunities if they jumped out at you with giant yellow eyes and feathers. You couldn't Seize the Day, Take the Chance, Just Go for It. You yourself were choking—on your indecision, on your fear—and there was no one to help you out.

Anything can go wrong. Anything can kill the bird. The bird may suffer from heat stroke. The bird may contract hepatitis, myocarditis, or tuberculosis. The bird may be stricken with parasitic worms. The owner should ask of themselves, what resources are you willing to expend on the bird? Of what quality is your dedication and proof thereof? What might the bird's sickness or health signify, and how long are you willing to nurse the bird?

#

You woke early in the morning with Felicity's hand on your shoulder.

Hey, she whispered. Her hair hung down over her face. Hey, wake up.

What is it? you mumbled. What's wrong?

I lied, she said. I didn't leave Mexico City because it was too hot, okay? And I didn't really care about him turning the place into a darkroom. Honestly, I thought it was cool.

You could smell the smoke and sweat on her. She smelled like something made out of sweet, rotting wood.

You don't want someone painting you constantly, she said. No one wants to be looked at that much. Maybe pathological narcissists, I guess. And then when he's not looking, he's *really* not looking, you know? It's like I don't even exist.

You didn't say anything.

Martín's better in my head than in real life, she added. Big fucking surprise.

Kneeling there, backlit by the moon, she looked like a ship's wooden figurehead—the kind that performed miracles when sailors prayed to it, or else sent them to their deaths.

If I can just figure out one thing, she said. If I can just get my head around one month of living. That would be great.

She scooted closer, and you waited for her to say something, anything. You thought, so this was how everyone's life felt, after all. Like they were waiting around to get started. Like they were the only ones who didn't have it Figured Out. Like at any moment someone was going to hand them an instruction manual, a how-to guide, something.

Felicity's face was inches from yours.

Do you know what I mean? she whispered.

Later, much later, you'd look back on that moment, thinking, who could explain what was happening in those days? Why couldn't we rescue ourselves from our own catastrophic lives? Why did we allow everything to be constantly on the verge of collapse?

Felicity, moonlit. Felicity, on the brink of some decision.

What do you think? she said.

What should we do?

CHAPTER 7

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