

THE HAUNTING OF THE FIELDS WOMEN

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## ABSTRACT

### THE HAUNTING OF THE FIELDS WOMEN

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The Haunting of the Fields Women is a 65,000-word horror fiction novel.

Parker Fields and her newly pregnant wife Annie have finally rid themselves of the wreckage that was Parker's mother, an institutionalized schizophrenic whose behavior led to the destruction of a once happy family. As far as Parker is aware, her real life is about to start. But then she starts seeing things, dreaming horrors that she only recognized through the visions that her mother spoke so terrifyingly of. As Parker tries to figure out what is happening to her, we delve into the previous generations of the Fields women: Parker's mother, Mitchie, a free-spirited orphan desperate for love. Bernie, an alcoholic who struggles to connect in a world full of disappointing people, and Robbie, young and in love with a man that she does not truly know. This book intersects the reality of mental illness, abuse, and the resilience to take it all on in a world that doesn't believe you. With four differing points of view on how recycled trauma can be interpreted and acted out, The Haunting of the Fields Women is a portrait of American psychosis.

This book sits in a liminal landscape for American women and the ghost stories that rest underneath the soil they live on. It is a ghost story, but more than that, it's proof-- a resounding song of the horrors that follow women around, that bleed into our daughters. In the words of Natalie Erika James, "We have all sensed the pain our mothers carry. And all of us are suspicious to some degree that we are partly to blame for her pain." America is the haunted house in this novel.

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## Chapter 1: Parker, 2005

Parker Fields gripped the pregnancy test box, reading over the instructions: Remove the test stick from the wrapper and take off cap. The white stick slid from the wrapper easily, firm as a scalpel. The cap popped off with a click.

Annie, Parker's would-be wife if gay marriage was legal, wiggled her pants to the floor before sitting on the toilet. Her red toenails peeked out from the bunched material at her feet. The polish was a shade lighter than the kind Parker's mom wore while she was an in-patient at Western State. Red Delicious.

Parker handed her the test. "Ready?"

Annie nodded deliberately, sinking into the movement. "I've been holding in my pee all morning." She slipped the stick in between her legs.

"Get to it then."

Parker was ready to be a mom, at least, that's what she knew to be true at the time. The word *mom* bounced around in Parker's head, pinballing off what she knew about parenthood, about love, about children. The concept of motherhood disentangled itself, like a pulled thread of a quilt, into an older version of Parker, thirty-four and dedicated to sacrifice. Parker prepared herself to give and give.

"I hope it's a girl," Annie said. "We could have a baby Parker running around, shit talking her mom and throwing punches at the other kids in the neighborhood."

"Or a little crybaby like you were."

Annie pulled the stick from between her legs, planting it on the sink ledge.

"I'll be honest, if it's a boy I don't think I'll love it as much," Parker said.

"Parker, you can't say that."

“Why?”

Annie flushed the toilet before bumping Parker out of the way to wash her hands.

“I really don’t understand how you are such a man-hater. You love your dad,” Annie replied.

“He’s still an idiot.”

“You’re an idiot.”

Parker slid in behind Annie, wrapping her arms around her waist. Parker’s chest filled. Years before she had come into the belief that Karma was a tangible, measurable ghost, anticipating her decisions. The good deeds she’d done filled up like metrics on a beaker and were poured out for the mistakes. Around the time she and Annie met, Parker realized by pointing her attention outward instead of inward, all of her history, disappointments, and issues seemed small. She was rewarded with this little love, this tiny piece of happiness that felt huge, enormous, big enough to make Parker feel fragile.

Parker and Annie met during a time in her life where Parker went to every house party, too afraid to go to the gay club in downtown Seattle after a trans woman was beaten to death in an alley just outside a club with a tire iron. When Parker read about it in the news, all she could think about was how loud the music inside must have been for no one to hear. Everyone inside the club was lying to themselves if they thought they were safe. Look what was knocking on the other side of the wall.

One night, Parker sat on a couch opposite Annie at her friend Perry’s house, three beers deep and restless. Everyone sat on the edge of their seats, waiting for something to happen, as promised by Perry’s invitation claiming “A Real Rager ”, yet, a few drinks down, and no one had

left their seats on the couch aside from stents to the bathroom. Perry flitted back and forth, fetching drinks, bringing ritz crackers and goat cheese on platters.

“Perry, tell us about Amanda,” Annie said.

“Who’s Amanda?”

“Amanda is my old co-worker, who was dating my old boss,” Perry replied.

“The creepy one?” Parker asked. Parker begged Perry to quit her job after she caught her boss looking at nude magazines. When he began placing them out on his desk when he called Perry into meetings and Perry threatened to go to HR, he fired her.

Perry nodded. She had a new job, selling make-up to her friends and family. “Right well you’ll love this, he got arrested.”

“What?” Nia said.

“Not surprised,” Annie smirked. A boy-man with chubby red cheeks leaned into her, whispering in her ear. She nodded, angled away from him to set her wine on the coffee table.

Parker observed Annie. They were in the same circle and had met a few times before, exchanging light conversations, but Annie was a mystery to Parker. She never got too wasted, never got into arguments, she remained unmoved. Parker, who felt moved by almost everything, found this boring. She thought, if she dropped a coin into Annie’s brown eyes, it would sink to the bottom.

“Yup,” Perry said with a pop. “He got caught outside the office on the security cameras slapping Amanda across the face.”

A collective, unsurprised groan traveled through the room.

“Is she alright?”

Perry tipped her wine back, leaving a red stain over her top lip. “She had a pretty bad concussion. Her memory kept tipping back and forth for a while, but she seems almost normal now.”

“If some guy hit me, he better be prepared to lose a limb,” Parker said.

“Not me,” Nia said. “If someone hit me, I don’t think I would be able to hit them back. Weak wrists.” Nia rotated her wrists in circles.

Parker scoffed, “I would be able to hit someone back without question.”

“Yeah, we know, Parker. You’re just waiting for someone to give you an excuse.”

They all laughed, including Annie, whose laugh seemed to surprise her coming out.

Parker took a long swig of the beer, clouded and dazed, pointing her gaze directly at Annie. “And you?”

Annie’s eyes trailed slowly to Parker, drawl-like. Her black sweater hung loose covering her hands to the knuckle. Her lidded eyes lifted reproachfully.

“Me?”

“Yeah, what would you do?” Parker asked again, louder.

Annie pulled her shoulders up. “I would hit someone back.”

“No way,” Parker replied too fast.

Annie placed her wine glass on the table. Her lips twitched in annoyance.

Parker smirked.

“Parker,” Perry warned.

“What? I just can’t see it.”

Annie shifted. At first, Parker thought she was conceding, but instead, she leaned across the coffee table into Parker’s personal space.

“Why is that?” she asked.

Without the space between them, Parker realized for the first time, Annie was pretty. How she never realized it before Parker didn't understand because she was sure men didn't miss it, evident from the way the man-boy's eyes lingered on Annie's back. Big doe eyes, feminine square jaw, large hoop earrings hung parallel to her mouth. Now that Annie opened, irritated and flushed, right in front of Parker, her assumptions about her collapsed. She felt the same way one feels when out in the forest alone, a gunshot goes off, and birds disperse into the air.

“You just don't seem like the type.” Parker paused. “You're so quiet.”

She was going to say passive, but the crowd grew tense, avoiding the pair, laughing uncomfortably under their breath.

“Why don't you try it then?” Annie smiled sweetly, offering up her cheek.

“You want me to smack you?” Parker staggered. She let out a breathy laugh to let the party know she had the situation under control.

“Go ahead and see what happens.”

Parker flexed the muscles in her legs to relieve the tension in her body, reflecting the tension in the room. She could smell the wine from Annie's glass, a sweet Sangria, and her stomach turned. Or was the smell coming from her mouth? Was she mouth breathing? Parker shut her mouth.

“You two are idiots,” Perry said.

Parker rocked forward, reaching across the space, and bopped Annie's forehead with the palm of her hand.

Annie's hand flew across Parker's face like casting a fishing line. Her wine glass up above her head like she was bringing a wrench down on someone. The room froze, petrified,

everyone shocked into silence. Parker didn't know what she expected to happen, but it hadn't been that. Her cheek burned with a red handprint.

The slap hadn't hurt, but Parker felt wounded regardless. "I barely bopped you."

Annie didn't reply. Her eyes searched Parker's face.

The room unfroze. A gay couple hovering behind Annie's couch snickered. The man-boy whispered, "God damn" under his breath. Parker stood up, red faced, and left the room.

The kitchen was cooler than the living room. Dark green curtains flapped against an open window, over a sink filled with spoons and glasses. Adjacent to the window, a cuckoo clock struck twelve, spitting out a barn swallow and swallowing it back inside.

Parker set her bottle in the sink, washing it out, the amber water circling the drain. She rinsed off her hand, and for a second imagined sticking it in the garbage disposal. She pulled her hand to her chest.

Outside, bats flitted back and forth, manic in the clear night. Chirps filtered through the open window. Parker grabbed a bottle of vodka from the freezer and walked out the back door, the wire screen smacking behind her.

The porch was quaint, covered in tiny plants with ivy hanging from the rafters above. The wood was painted a gray blue that reminded Parker of lake water. She sat on the steps. The stars shuddered behind the wings of the bats.

Parker thought about how much her dad would love a night like that. All that was missing was light music playing from an old radio

The screen door shut again. Parker shut her eyes, tired and embarrassed, and hoping that whoever it was would catch a hint, realize she wanted to be alone, and walk straight back into the house.

“What’re you doing out here?” Annie asked.

“I’m smelling the wind and the trees or whatever.” Parker gestured with her hand. “I’m fine, you can go inside.”

Annie sat down next to her.

“Jesus,” Parker said.

“You had that coming, you know?”

“Thanks.” Parker’s throat swelled and ached.

“I don’t know what you expected to happen.”

“Not that. Obviously.” Parker’s jaw clenched. “I really just need a minute.”

“Well, you can’t be mad at me. I literally told you what would happen.” Annie pulled her knees to her chest, peeking at Parker as if she was hurting Annie’s feelings.

“I can’t be mad at you?” Parker’s voice rose.

Annie shook her head with a closed-lipped smile.

“Like I said, I just need a minute. You can go back in.”

Still, Annie stayed. “No one came out after you, so I thought someone should.”

Parker let out a laugh. “I’m a big girl.”

Annie nodded.

“Everyone’s drunk. I don’t think they’re not my friends or whatever you’re trying to imply here.”

“I’m just surprised they let it happen. I could see how drunk you were from across the room. They should have de-escalated,” Annie replied.

“What’re you doing staring at me from across the room?”

Annie just shrugged, her cheeks pink.

Parker's stomach flipped, like dropping a stone in a bird bath. She had meant to goad her, but based on Annie's reaction, she didn't think she was too far off from the truth.

"So, you were watching me?" Parker asked.

Annie shrugged again.

Parker's irritation disappeared. She took a big swig of vodka, holding down a gag.

"Why would they come out here when the slap was my own fault anyways?" Parker teased.

Annie smiled. "I'm sorry I slapped you."

"Sorry I bopped you."

For a moment that felt like an hour, that felt more like years, they sat on the porch, a light breeze moving between them, as if to tease, as if to say, move a bit closer. Parker shivered, but made no move to go inside. In those moments, Parker didn't think much. The rush of the first moment's of the potential of love flooded her body, rendering her useless, irrational, incapable, and there was no turning back or reversing what the two sparked.

Luckily, it worked out for them.

Now, they were going to have a baby together. Parker's eyes teared up at the thought. Annie scooted out from in front of her to wipe her hands.

Parker wiped her eyes, opened them back to the mirror.

A man stood behind her.

She flinched, hard, knocking the pregnancy test into the sink.

"Are you okay?" Annie asked.

Parker's heart hammered against her chest. "I just saw a man behind us."

Annie's eyes widened, she slowly turned to the shower curtain. She ripped it open.

"Nothing there."

Parker ran a hand through her hair. She saw him. Slicked back black hair, a white scar down his chin, skeleton sharp, long face. Hard black eyes.

Once Parker had lived outside of Seattle in a rundown house infested with mice. Afterwards, for months, she saw mice scuttling in the corner of her eye, would wake to the sounds of them crawling in the walls. Even though she didn't live there anymore. The man's image had been fleeting as a mouse, but so real, physical.

"I can't sit here and wait." Annie pulled the pregnancy test from the sink and set it back on the edge. "I'm going to switch over the laundry." She kissed Parker's cheek and left the bathroom.

The washing machine started in the other room. Parker sat down on the toilet. Her heart was still thumping erratically. She shut her eyes, drifting away from the bathroom.

"Parker? Times up."

Parker opened her eyes slowly, to Annie giving her a worried look. Parker reached out to grab her hand, and Annie clutched the outreached hand in both of hers, leaning over to kiss each side. Parker sighed.

They both took a moment, facing off with the pregnancy test before Parker picked it up, brought it into the light.

"What does it say?" Annie asked.

Parker put the stick back down on the sink. Two blue lines.

"You're pregnant."

## Chapter 2: Mitchie, 1973

Thin smoke curled up from Mitchie's mouth to the ceiling, evaporating before reaching the fan. The blades rotated listlessly due to the weak electrical system in the dorms. Mitchie laid back on her bed, pursing her lips around a joint, sucking till the tip charred. A grocery-store romance novel bent open, forgotten, next to her.

The window by her bed was opened, letting the cool air wash over her face. Outside, the campus was lit only by the streetlamps and porch lights of the sororities across the street. Crickets chirped in rhythm, palpitating frantically together, calling out.

The joint paper reminded Mitchie of Bible pages. Her Aunt Carol used to lick her finger before turning the pages of her Bible in church, leaving wet indents where her thumb had been. Carol sat rim-rod straight in church, nodded her head, raised her hands in the air during hymns. It was ironic how seriously she took the whole thing, especially when Mitchie knew Carol didn't tell God everything. And why would she want to? Seemed to Mitchie like God didn't really give a damn about either one of them on the scale of things. No, Mitchie believed in a bigger something else, like music, soft and low, reaching out, longing to be heard.

There was a knock on the door. Mitchie suspected either a prank or her imagination. In the first few weeks of classes, the other girls on her floor flocked together, leaving their doors open, sneaking vodka bottles underneath their beds, perming their hair together before dances and mixers. Mitchie had trailed along at first, leaving her door open just a crack, but after watching groups of girls laughing and running around the building together, Mitchie shut her door. She had always been unwanted, and she wouldn't put herself in a position of being left behind.

Mitchie didn't care what they thought of her.

The knock came again, thunderous, like the heel of a boot.

Mitchie got out of bed, stamping the joint out in a Coke can by her bedside.

On the other side of the door, a woman with big front teeth and red puffy cheeks leaned against the door frame. Her hair hung past her hips, straight and dark brown. One of her arms slung across her abdomen. The woman's pallor washed across even her lips, which had a faintly purple color. Mitchie didn't recognize her. She must have been from another floor.

"I need help," she groaned and tried to stand up straighter. Beneath her skirt, a long trail of blood flowed down her leg into her socks.

Mitchie did not open the door any further. No one else was awake on the floor. It was two A.M, hallway empty, their doors closed firmly. She looked back into her room for an excuse as to why she could not help the woman, but couldn't find one. The smoke from her joint gone, her book unopened on the bed. No textbook in sight. Even the radio which had been playing Dick Gregory on KJR 95 had turned to static.

"Can I come in?" The woman stepped inside the door, a small drop of blood spotting the hallway carpet. Her toes touched the tips of Mitchie's. Mitchie retreated and the toes followed, lurching past her.

The woman stood in the middle of her room, underneath the bronze dome light fixture on the ceiling. In the light, her skin took on a clay texture, like Mitchie could run a finger over her cheek and come away with a glob of play-doh skin. Silence pounded between them.

The woman's eyes dipped closed.

"Are you okay?" Mitchie asked.

Silence.

"What happened?"

The woman's eyes widened, like an infant's. Her lip jutted out and shook. Mitchie recognized her then, from class. Her name was Jenna. She sat on the edge of boys' desks like a call girl. She appeared much younger next to Mitchie's bed.

"You should really go to the hospital. Do you want me to call someone?"

"No," Jenna replied.

"I can drive you," Mitchie said, although she wasn't entirely sure if she could.

"Please, we can't go to the hospital." Jenna's eyes expanded unnaturally. Her pupils dilated into dime-sized black marbles.

"Okay." Mitchie stiffened. She wished she had pretended to be asleep. "You can sit in the chair." Mitchie pointed to a light brown rocking chair in the corner she had taken with her when she moved to Seattle. It belonged to her mom before she died. Her Uncle Sam had an identical one at his cabin. The seat was a shade lighter from use, and her mother and Sam's initials were carved into the arm: B.F and S.F.

"Thank you." Jenna hunched over, bending at the waist, and started walking just like the possum Mitchie ran over the previous summer, stumbling, catching itself before pancaking onto the pavement.

Mitchie followed behind her, placing a hand on her sweaty back until she flipped into the chair, clenched and tight.

"I'm Mitchie by the way." Mitchie went to the bathroom to grab towels.

"Jenna."

"I know we have class together."

Mitchie came out of the bathroom and spread the towels by Jenna's feet like laying down newspaper for a puppy.

Jenna touched her own leg, and her finger came away with blood. “I think something’s wrong,” she said. “They said the bleeding would stop in an hour. It’s been three.”

“Who said?” Mitchie wiped at Jenna’s hairline with a towel. Little pearls of sweat glided down her forehead.

“The man.”

“What man?”

Jenna didn’t respond.

After several moments, Mitchie asked, “Do you want some water?”

Jenna nodded. Mitchie pushed herself up to go to the sink in the corner of her room. A stack of cups were stacked underneath the porcelain in a wooden box.

“What man?” Mitchie tried again. The faucet only gave out cold water, which, while nice in the late summer, in fall, Mitchie usually walked to the end of the hall to use the communal bathroom sinks to wash her face.

Silence.

Mitchie grabbed a glass and rinsed it. “Look, I can’t help you if you won’t talk to me.” She spit, “It’s a helluva time of night.” Mitchie turned the faucet off and handed Jenna the water who took it in one weak hand, almost spilling it, before cradling it over her legs.

Jenna started to cry again. “I needed to take care of something, but I don’t think they did it right.”

Jenna rocked the chair back and forth, the water spilling over her fingertips. Mitchie still did not understand.

“I took care of a problem,” Jenna repeated, looking down at her skirt, soaked with blood.

Blood that was not coming from her legs at all, but further up above her skirt. Mitchie turned away, her cheeks burned. “Oh,” she mumbled, her hands trembling. She wiped them over the back of her shirt.

Jenna nodded.

“Should I call your boyfriend? Maybe he can come help you?”

Jenna snatched Mitchie’s hand out of the air, grasping it tightly, so tight the skin turned red. “You can’t. He doesn’t know, and I don’t know what he would do if he found out. I mean, he’s not even my boyfriend really.”

Mitchie plucked Jenna’s fingers off her own.

“Well, I’m not a doctor, so what do you want me to do here?” She threw her hands in the air.

Jenna buried her face in her hands, shaking it back and forth, and Mitchie couldn’t watch it anymore without crying herself. Mitchie’s stomach turned into knots.

“Did they give you anyone to call?” she asked.

“No. It was just me and this other girl in a hotel room. They did the surgery, threw a couple pads at us, and said to leave in ten minutes.”

“When was that? Where’s the other girl?”

“A few hours ago, I think,” Jenna said.

“Okay,” Mitchie sighed, “Okay, I’m going to go make a call.”

Jenna sat up.

“Not to the police. My aunt used to be a nurse.”

Jenna relaxed, sat back, tipped her head until she looked like she was basking in the sun.

Mitchie grabbed her coin purse; a black pouch the size of a cassette tape she stole from a grocery store. “Don’t die, please.”

Jenna snorted, and Mitchie hid a smile. She hadn’t meant to be funny.

The phone booths were at the end of the hall. The hallway lights were left on at night in case girls needed to use the bathroom. The walls were covered in leftover tape from where posters were ripped down. One remained, a picture of a fist in the air that said: *Unify*. An empty pack of Marlboros left on the floor.

Mitchie wanted to call her Uncle Sam. He never yelled, never said a mean word to her, never got annoyed. He was calm and separate from the whole world, locked away in his cabin in the woods, only leaving for groceries and to go fishing. But Carol would know more about this.

Mitchie prayed she would be the one to pick up the phone.

Graffiti and fingerprints covered the phones. Mitchie pushed a few coins in, spinning the dial.

The phone rang twice before her Uncle Dean answered.

“Who the fuck is this?”

“Hi, Uncle Dean, it’s Michelle.”

“Michelle? What’re you doing calling us so late? You alright?” Dean had a strong accent from his years driving a cab in Boston, which only broke through when he wasn’t in a smooth headspace, like getting a call in the middle of the night from his adopted niece.

“Could I speak to Aunt Carol?”

He huffed as he tried to lift himself to a sitting position. “What’s wrong?”

“Could I just talk to Carol please?”

“Who is it?” Mitchie heard in the background. Mitchie imagined Carol with her blonde hair tucked into her satin cap she wore to bed at night, a purple night dress, and kind eyes.

Uncle Dean handed Carol the phone. “Mitchie? What’s wrong?”

Mitchie almost cried then. She wanted Carol to wrap her arms around her, rub up and down her back. She used to hide under the covers in Carol’s bed when Dean would go on business trips while Carol did the crosswords. Carol would ask her for answers from under the blankets, although Mitchie never knew any. When they would get out of bed, they would dance in the kitchen to Sonny and Cher.

“I just, there’s this girl who came into my room and there’s blood everywhere.” Mitchie’s voice shook.

Dean mumbled in the background, and Carol shuffled around.

“Hold on sweetheart.” Carol’s feet padded across a room.

“She’s bleeding a lot from underneath her skirt. I don’t know what to do. I don’t even know her.”

A door shut.

“How long has she been bleeding?” Carol asked.

A hot tear rolled down Mitchie’s cheek, but she wiped it away. “she said a few hours. She’s really pale.”

“Mitchie, you can’t be crying right now.” Carol’s voice hardened. No one would have guessed it by looking at her, but Carol had been in the war. She had muscles then and never shied away from a sliced finger, puke, a broken bone. But her husband Dean married a small-town Christian girl, and the new Carol didn’t fit that anymore. Over time, Carol buried that part of herself, pinning the remnants of her time suturing eyebrows and stenting half-blown-off legs in

her closet, along with her uniform and the pictures of her time in Vietnam she had once hung proudly in the kitchen. A passiveness replaced what was calloused.

Occasionally, war Carol dug herself to the surface, raspy from disuse. Like now, “Afterwards, cry all you want, but she’s way more scared than you are right now, so you be scared when she’s done.”

Mitchie shoved down her fear and took a deep breath.

“Go to the kitchen and get some ice,” Carol ordered.

“The kitchen is closed.”

“Check anyways. Then check the fridge in the common areas. There’s bound to be something frozen.”

“Okay, then what?”

“Then you’re going to place it over her pelvis, and keep her feet elevated. If the bleeding doesn’t stop in an hour, call me back and I’ll come to get you.”

Carol lived over an hour away. They hung up.

Mitchie found a bag of frozen vegetables in the common room freezer and brought it back to her room.

Jenna was leaning back in the rocking chair, her mouth open in sleep.

“Hey.” Mitchie nudged her arm.

Jenna’s skirt washed out with blood. Once it had a colorful floral pattern, now, only the flowers and a pink outline remained. There didn’t seem to be any more blood than before she left, which Mitchie took as a good sign.

“I think I’ve changed my mind,” Jenna moaned. “We need to go to a hospital.”

“Jenna, I have a plan now.”

Jenna shook her head. "Please can you take me?"

Mitchie was taken aback. Minutes ago, Jenna was determined to stay in her room. She took her by the hand and said resolutely, "No."

"Why not?" Jenna snapped.

"I'm not going to jail for you," Mitchie said. Mitchie had no idea what kind of person had helped Jenna. What if they were in the mob? A gang? What if Jenna wasn't supposed to tell anyone, and they came after Mitchie?

"You can't stop me." Jenna pushed herself up in the chair.

"Stop it!" Mitchie yelled, her voice cracking, followed by a brief silence. Jenna tipped back and forth like a bobblehead.

"My plan will work," Mitchie said.

Jenna didn't have the energy to respond. Her eyes slipped shut.

Mitchie placed a sheet over the bed and her quilt, unfortunately white since it was the only extra sheet she had.

Mitchie placed a hand on Jenna who moved like a marble on a tilted surface, slowly, then catching speed. Mitchie caught her in the air and put an arm underneath hers, lifting. The skirt stuck to the chair in a wet heap as she stood. Once near the bed, Mitchie almost dropped the bleeding girl. Catching herself by the arm, Jenna helped herself onto the sheet.

Mitchie put pillows under her legs and made her hold the vegetables to her pelvis. Jenna sat so quietly, Mitchie imagined it was all a dream. She was still alone in bed, staring at the ceiling fan. Mitchie took a seat on the small sliver of bed Jenna wasn't on. She didn't bother to pick up her book. Her mind focused on the girl next to her and the events of the last hour.

After an hour, Mitchie called Carol back and told her the bleeding had mostly stopped. Her aunt sounded like she had not taken a breath since they talked last. Carol said she loved her and hung up.

Walking back to her room, Mitchie thought the shakes would have come back or she would want to cry, but she only felt worn. Jenna was still asleep when she closed the door behind her. Mitchie pulled an old sleeping bag from underneath her bed and unrolled it onto the floor. Inside the bag, she turned restlessly from side to side until her eyes landed on the rocking chair.

Blood dripped from its edge to the ground in a small puddle that complemented the large puddle pooled in the seat. The edges had started to dry, but the middle was saturated and bright red. The chair rocked back and forth, dripping with each tilt. Back and forth, drip. Back and forth, drip.

### Chapter 3: Bernie, 1953

The lock was broken on the bathroom stall. Bernie folded over herself, drunk and singing while Carol held it shut with her body.

“Splish Splash, I was taking a bath,” Bernie laughed.

“Bernie, shut up and get out here,” Carol yelled.

“Yeah, shut your mouth and hurry up,” another woman called out from the line, growing out the door.

“Rub dub, just relaxing in the tub,” Bernie sang louder. She wiped her mouth, smearing her lipstick.

Bernie watched Carol’s foot tap, tap, tap impatiently in her ugly shoes. She wore the pair of heels Bernie had told her specifically not to wear. They were heels, but the toes resembled a men’s loafer.

“Hurry up, I want to get back to the boys,” Carol said.

Bernie had been friends with Carol since before she could remember. She couldn't think of a time in her life when Carol wasn't there. Yet, once they got old enough to notice boys, Carol became such a rag. She was always hovering, watching where Bernie went, who she talked to, what she found interesting. She watched Bernie with the precision of a girl in love. Sometimes Bernie would catch Carol mirroring her own gestures or words, like a puppet. Bernie started to think Carol never really had a personality of her own but simply mirrored those around her. Waiting for boys to look at her the way they looked at Bernie.

“I don’t know why you want to go back to those duds. They have the personalities of old men,” Bernie said with a hint of malice.

Carol still hadn't lost it to anyone, which was why Bernie thought she was still obsessed over boys. She could tell when any man spoke to Carol, her friend imagined him picking her up for a date and sweeping her off her feet. She thought sex was some magical, religious concept.

Carol hesitated. "Well, at least they have money. You haven't had to pay for a drink all night."

Bernie flushed, pushed against the door, unamused. "Money doesn't make someone interesting."

She turned the faucet on. The water ran cold. Bernie was drunk, her face hot and red, her make-up dusted underneath her eyes. She fingered through her hair, still intact and curled.

"I look like a Greek goddess," Bernie said to herself, licking her lips. She pulled the skin underneath her eyes down. The skin tightened, and the pinks of her eyelids watered.

"Bern, let's go drink."

Bernie let go of her eyes. She pulled her mouth into a Cheshire smile, until the skin felt like it would rip, before releasing.

"Yeah, alright. I need another drink." Bernie followed Carol into the bar.

The Hunter's was once a barbershop planted in the middle of town on the outskirts of the Hoh Rainforest. Its open sign hung amidst family houses, obscured behind Sitka Spruce, Western Red Cedar, Douglas Fir, and Western Hemlock, moss obscuring the wood like blankets hung over clothes lines. What began as forest land had been invaded, remade into an upper-class sanctuary. In 1942 the barbershop burned to the ground, taking the surrounding forest and trees with it. Instead of cleaning the debris and starting fresh, the city built over the top of the wreckage. They covered the ashes with asphalt; suppressing the history of it without disposing of the evidence. Meanwhile, the owner of the barbershop, whose business had burnt down, was left

with a basement equipped for natural disasters, impossible to burn. He decided to open a supper club, which turned into The Huntsman.

Bernie and Carol bumped around patrons. The bar's lack of windows darkened the dancefloor. A stage lit up to highlight the band. The singer's eyes skimmed along the room, sad and trapped. She belted out resentful jazz, fevered, like a bird trapped in a box. Her eyeliner was penciled in thick, and her hair resembled a long rope, pulled into a dense ponytail. Men's mouths watered at the foot of the stage, ogling the singer like they wanted to clip her wings, mount them in a glass case, and put them on display.

Bernie pushed past the men, taking up space in their large suits, fedoras, slicked hair and tucked ties. The bartender threw up a shaker, shook hard, pouring a brown drink in one motion. They possessed the club, relaxed with their hands in their pockets, watching the women darting around each other, displaying their precocious smiles and hammering jaws.

The group Bernie and Carol were with sat in a boxed section of the club. The dark lights made it almost impossible to see anyone's face. Bernie flopped into a seat next to one of the men Carol had been talking with, a blonde boy whose hands lingered next to her knee.

"How was the bathroom, ladies?"

"Tom, it isn't appropriate to ask ladies about their bathroom habits." Carol leaned forward into his line of vision.

"It was fantastic, thank you for asking," Bernie replied.

He laughed and wrapped an arm around the back of the booth. Carol looked between them a little lost. In the back, the bartender threw up a shaker, shook hard, pouring another brown drink in one motion, exactly as before.

“Okay, listen to this,” a goose-like man said, leaning his long neck across the table. “I’m going out with this girl, who’s friends with some other gal at this drive in that we go to. Everyone’s getting ready for the movie when we see these two colored boys walking in between cars, running a key over people’s paint. Here!” He grabbed a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. The smoke obscured his face, blurring the outline of his mouth, his eyes.

“What’d you do?”

“Well, a few other guys get out of the car, get up in their faces, but this chick keeps grabbing at my arm, pulling me back in the car. Swear to god, thought there was going to be a knife fight, but the colored boys left after a few more guys got out of their cars.”

“Of course, she did. Hell, what kind of America is this anymore?” a short man across from him said, puffing his chest out and smoothing down his tie. The anger on his face was palpable.

“America! America! Who cares? Let everyone alone.” Bernie’s hands flew up in the air, spit flew off her top lip. The men sat back, away from where they leaned into each other. Tom’s arm moved from behind Bernie, back into his lap.

The singer belted out the last notes of a song. The men clapped for her, Carol clapped for her. The singer took a swig of water, held the water in her mouth and stood there for a moment, letting the crowd wash over her.

It reminded Bernie of Billie Holiday getting pulled off stage for singing “Strange Fruit.” She remembered thinking for what? It was just a song. And those men, grabbing all over her, were desecrating it and thinking themselves better for it. Of course, once she learned what the song was about, she understood, but that feeling of helplessness never left. The petulant side of

Bernie coiled with injustice. Men got to say whatever they wanted, and the minute a woman spoke up, told them to shut it, they flocked together and turned on her.

“Bernie, maybe you should slow down,” Carol whispered in Bernie’s ear. Bernie pulled away and drank more from her daiquiri. The bartender threw up a shaker, shook hard, pouring a brown drink in one motion, again and again.

The men laughed at some joke and Carol laughed with them and her mouth opened but nothing came out.

“I’m bored.” Bernie rose from her seat, scooting past the knees of the men.

The crowd jostled, cranking their hips, clamping their mouths open, and shut, twirling fingers, wet hands, clear glass cups, and moving, all of it, swaying to the side, swaying in front of Bernie’s eyes.

Bernie pushed off of someone. Their eyes turned to her, but she made no move to meet them. Her head spun. She closed her eyes and squeezed, hoping it would ground her to the bar once again. The cheap cologne and powder coming off the skin of everyone around her turned her stomach.

When Bernie opened her eyes again, the bar froze.

A spot cleared on the floor, and in the center, Bernie’s dad wavered in the shadows of the people. Bernie felt she was expecting to see him, although he had been dead for many years. In the familiarity of him, she didn’t panic. His obsidian hair slicked back, one strand falling next to his eyes. His pale green eyes were strikingly deep, shadowed by the line of his eye as if he were wearing eyeliner. A long bony jaw, like that of a skeleton. He tilted his head, staring at her with his pursed lips, a hint of a smile playing at his mouth. His smile morphed into a big wolfy grin. He was perpetually young.

Bernie took a step toward him. The music picked up into something bolder, harsh slow beats puppet the arms flowing through the air, the mouths moving slower now, rewound in time. Bernie smelled fire, or something similar. Her eyes drifted to see where the smell came from, but her dad crooked his skinny finger. He took steps backwards, and everyone moved through him, or around him, like smoke. Every step Bernie took grew heavier. Her limbs weighed more than before, or the air thickened.

His mouth moved, and she imagined his voice, slippery and sinewy, all of the S's strung out because of his fat bottom lip. His mouth moved, but she couldn't hear him; the music was too loud, pounding, moving the club around them. Glasses pattered to the ends of tables. No one else seemed to notice. They continued dancing and tilting.

Bernie's heart clenched and unclenched. She wanted to reach for him, get him out of this crumbling place.

"Stop," she yelled to him.

Time moved slow, slower. He took a step back. Bernie pushed from a table. Time lasted forever, folded over on itself, trapping Bernie inside the crease.

Voices pitter pattered, but they didn't make sense, and they didn't sound like her dad. *You need to leave, get up.*

Sweat collected on her forehead. A jolt ran up her right side, and she shut her eyes. Bernie's head spiraled, as if attached to a propeller, and she could hear its wings slice through the air.

Abruptly, everything was still.

"Bernie, we need to get you home." Someone pulled her up, gripping underneath her arm. Bernie ripped her arm out of their hands, her eyes still shut.

“Bernie?” Carol said, sounding pinchingly annoyed while feigning concern.

Bernie’s eyes opened, and she was sitting in another booth, on the other side of the room.

“Let her be,” a male voice came from next to her ear.

She was sandwiched in between two men, large, burly, and sweating through their suits.

One wiped the sweat off his face with a white napkin, yellowed from his perspiration. The other’s hand laid across Bernie’s thigh, dangerously high, on the line of her skirt. Her leg rested over the top of the sweating man, displayed lewdly.

“Bernie,” Carol snapped, holding out a hand for Bernie to take. The singer from earlier stationed behind her, wringing her hands together.

“She does this sometimes, boys. She just had a little too much to drink,” Carol said, smiling at everyone. Bernie was relieved she was talking, giving her the space she needed to take her hand. Carol pulled her to her feet.

Bernie’s dad was gone. But he had been there, telling Bernie...something. She could picture the way his mouth moved, and the words were there, sitting in her brain, but the sounds were lost. Her brain skimmed by the words, traveling around them.

At first, she had been happy, but now that he wasn’t in front of her, it was not a relief to see him. The last time she had seen him was the day he died, and after what she’d done, his appearance felt like a threat. It set her teeth on edge.

“I’m alright,” Bernie said, holding onto Carol’s arm. “Always gold, right Carol?”

The singer watched her as if she was a wild animal. Tom from earlier walked up with their coats over his arm. He touched Carol’s waist.

“How long was I over there for?” Bernie asked the singer.

“Not long I don’t think.” Her eyes were kind. Bernie averted her eyes. The singer rubbed a thumb up her forearm in a comforting gesture.

“You better get her home,” Tom said, releasing Carol from his arm. Her eyebrow twitched, and Bernie knew she would be hearing about this the entire ride home.

“No,” Bernie said. “You go ahead and stay. I’ll walk. It isn’t far.”

Carol seemed taken aback and annoyed at the same time, inundated with conflicting emotions. She left Tom’s side, wrapping her coat over her shoulders. “I’m not letting you walk home alone, stupid.” She gave Tom one last parting look. They departed, shoulder to shoulder.

“You owe me so big,” Carol said. As uptight as she was, she was a good friend to Bernie. No matter what she did or said, Carol stayed with her. Shamefully, Bernie thought it pitiful, although under the circumstances of the night, she was thankful for it.

“You remember when I used to stay with you, and we used to sneak out onto the roof of the garage?” Bernie asked.

Carol smiled a warm, tiny smile. Her teeth were perfect, from the braces she had in high school. She was one of the only people Bernie knew whose parents could afford braces.

“Of course. You broke your leg when you fell off the roof. My parents were furious.”

“I thought your mom would have an aneurysm. She looked like a balloon about to pop.”

“You always infuriated her,” Carol said, starting down the sidewalk. “Let’s walk. It is a nice night.”

Bernie grimaced. “It’s freezing.”

“Don’t be a baby.”

Begrudgingly she fell into step. The two women were quiet for a moment, rain hanging onto their eyebrows. Bernie huddled close to the buildings, warmed by passing heat ducts.

“You had a dream about being hunted through the woods. You woke up and knocked the radio off the roof,” Carol continued.

“I’m surprised you remember. We never talk about stuff like that anymore.”

She shrugged. “It was all you would talk about for days. And you slipped and broke your leg.”

Bernie laughed. She had not almost slipped off the roof. Carol, woken by Bernie’s screams, had shoved her from the roof by accident.

They turned the corner to Bernie’s house and started up the walk. She lived in a moss-covered brick house on the side of a hill. On the porch, large potted plants covered the banisters. A gravel road wrapped around the house and led to a large red door, worn and scratched around the handle. Around the three acres, a rustic wood fence hand built by her father surrounded the violet wildflowers and weeping willow trees. To the back of the house a brown log barn with a sliding door that used to be Bernie’s father’s workshop overlooked the yard. The yard, covered in grass, was strung with thin streams, the chatter of small animals and wind swept weeds. Fresh as spring morning in the day. But a moonlit agitated quiet when the sun went down.

The porch light had been broken since Bernie was a kid, and she never got it fixed. She jabbed at the door scratching around the handle with her keys.

The key finally slipped into the lock, and the door creaked open.

“Your house is always so quiet,” Carol whispered.

“Come on, it’s cold.” Bernie walked in, and Carol slipped behind her. “It’s peaceful.”

“It’s disturbing.”

As Bernie closed the door, she took in the barn on the other side of the property. Lit from the moon's reflection, its door was padlocked shut. The stars reflected in the gleam of the upstairs window, like eyes piercing through the dark.

## Chapter 4: Robbie, 1931

For how awful Robbie's team was, that day, they would have their best game yet. Robbie caught a few stray grounders, O'Neal stole three bases, and Rich hit a double, but most of that could be chalked up to luck. The real reason they were doing alright was O'Neal's shy friend. He hit three home runs, slamming them over the tiny wall built around the field to separate the pitch from the woods.

In the sixth inning they were losing by three. Robbie ambled her way out of the dugout. O'Neal's friend edged past her, returning from the bases. He didn't look like much. Cool black hair slicked back, holding his hat in his hand, fiddling with the brim. He was handsome, but his face looked stretched like taffy, skeletal. He didn't have much cheek to him. It didn't matter much since he could smack a ball.

"Yeah, Robbie, hit it out of the park!" O'Neal called from the bench. Robbie tipped her cap to him. The boys let Robbie play because they let John, her brother, play, and he wouldn't play if Robbie couldn't play too.

"Hey, Robbie, if you hit a double I'll give you a kiss!" Freddy shouted from the bench, hitting Rich in the chest. Rich calculated their chances of winning on a scorecard, far too invested in the game.

"I'd rather eat my own underwear!" Robbie yelled back. His face fell, and Rich smacked him upside the head laughing.

O'Neal's friend leaned forward on the bench, his eyes hidden, grinning, wickedly amused underneath the shadow of his hat.

The pitcher hocked up into his mouth, spitting. A fly buzzed by Robbie's ear, and she swatted it before stepping up to the plate, locked in. The boys were yelping like monkeys against the dugout fence, "Hey pitcher! Get 'em Robbie! Come on, slug one!"

The pitcher wound up. Robbie shifted her baseball shoes in the dirt, an old pair she had taken from John's closet. The ball flew, and she cracked it all the way out to the wall where it skidded.

A billow of dirt skimmed by Robbie's eyes as she threw her bat in the dirt, running toward first base. Her hat blew off her head, long hair trailing behind her like she was on fire. The other team's men hustled around, screaming for their outfielder to get to the ball, but he stood next to the wall rubbing the back of his neck with his hand. Robbie high fived John standing at third base before rounding to go home.

"Nice hit, Rob!" he said.

She stepped onto home plate grinning from ear to ear, while the boys swarmed her, patting her back and rubbing her hair. She swatted them off.

"Roberta Frances, you show-off." Rich cut in between Robbie and the rest of the boys wrapping his arm around her shoulders, herding her back to the dugout. He had taken to touching her in that way. Robbie wasn't sure if she minded or not. It was weird to her when he started using small interactions to replace saying things he knew would get him in trouble, like the way the boys catcalled the east end girls walking home off the bus. He was starting to see her as a squeeze and not as the girl who used to leave him crying on the sidewalk on the way to school because he couldn't keep up.

She minded it less because a lot of the other guys kept to themselves. They assumed Robbie was Rich's girl. Fat chance of that. Women were flying planes, Hitler was picking up

speed in Germany, and Robbie wasn't about to marry some dope that once peed his pants at summer camp because his friends dared him to.

She picked her hat up and put it back on. Sweat plastered the hair to her forehead.

The only one left in the dug-out was O'Neal's friend, picking at some sunflower seeds in a bag. "Nice hit, gal," he said, his voice like molasses.

"Thank you," Robbie replied.

He dug through the seeds, daintily, picking up one in the bag and bringing it to his mouth without touching any of the others. The pile of boys pushed their way into the dug-out.

"Leo's up!" someone called out.

"No he isn't," said a player from the other team, wearing a sweat soaked white t-shirt and jeans with holes over the knees. He squinted into the sun.

"Is there a problem?" Leo stood a head taller than any other guy.

"That was the last ball, unless one of you guys brought some?" he said, quieter than he had been before. His face and the hunch of his back reminded Robbie of a weasel.

Robbie knew not a single one of them had brought a ball. They were always late to games, always forgetting gear, and always the most hated team in the league.

"Probably not," she said, grabbing onto the fence.

"Why don't you boys just go get the ball she shot on the other side of the wall? It's not like it can walk away." Leo's grin didn't meet his eyes.

Their eyes found the ground.

"You're not from around town are you?" Weasel Boy asked.

Leo shook his head, pulling his hat up from his head. He pressed his lips together, wet, uncracked.

“That forest is *supposed* to be haunted,” Robbie cut in.

Ever since they were little, Robbie and her brother were warned about the rainforest. The different tales blurred and bound: little bodies of children hung up in the branches of the trees, twigs bleeding from their hands, weaving through their ribs, entangled so they couldn’t dislodge their tiny arms and legs, laid to rest in the trees until their bones turned to bark. When the townsfolk tried to pry them down, they were eaten up by the branches and moss. Ghosts ran in between the trunks, like sprites, waiting for others to join them.

“Hocus pocus,” Leo said.

He turned to walk out of the dug-out but stopped before Robbie, taking her off guard. He waited for her to turn to the side out of his way, which she did after a pause. He slid in between the fence without touching a single sliver of Robbie’s body.

“No. Games over, you shouldn’t go in there,” Weasel Boy said.

“Afraid of ghosts?” Leo taunted.

The boy stepped back and started walking toward his team, clearly assured.

“You go right ahead and risk it,” he shrugged. “I’ve never seen another person go into those woods. I won’t be the first.”

Robbie doubted Weasel Boy had been the first to do anything, had never discovered the unfound. Amelia Earhart was a person who knew about unexplored spaces. Robbie thought of her often, remembering seeing her in a newspaper strewn across her father’s desk. Earhart didn’t have fear when it came to the unknown, the press called her “The Queen of the Air.” Robbie desperately wanted to attend her lecture tour, but the family Ford turned to sputtering when the speedometer hit thirty miles.

During Amelia’s flight across North America, Robbie imagined she must have looked down below and seen expanses no one else had, let alone a woman. That view, rich cornfields, forests, lakes, mountains, retracted backwards, seemingly small. Robbie couldn’t even put it into words, a feeling too large for her body to hold.

“Come on, Leo, we are getting our asses handed to us anyway,” Dirk called, trying to catch up to him.

Leo danced ahead. The apprehension across the field ruffed in silence. Robbie’s team blinked at him, unable to stop him without moving forward themselves.

And for once, Robbie questioned it—the gossip, the rumors, the way humans’ minds linked together like a tapestry, believing in the hushed murmurs in their small town without a speculation of doubt. She questioned if it got distorted somehow, as harmless as the talk seemed.

Her parents had warned her to stay out of the woods. Sweet as they were, naive as they were, they were realists, insisting that the forest itself couldn’t possibly be haunted because ghosts weren’t real, and monsters weren’t real, and kids just made up stories to keep each other entertained. However, the woods were full of real terror—animals, plants, the maze constructed by an untapped forest.

As much as Robbie loved them, the older she grew, the more prominent an invisible wall between herself and her parents became. Their persistence to remain holed away from the rest of the world made their advice seem abysmal, and small minded. She loved them from a distance, as one would love a toy, with emotional attachment, but without respect. When she thought of them she saw the suppleness of her mother’s arms, mounted on a gray recliner. Her dad slouched on the couch. TV trays covered with leftovers from the night before. The Jack Benny Program reflected in their eyes.

Her parents' mindset reflected the towns. The adults undermined the witless children's beliefs when they spoke them aloud, but adults all the same avoided the forest, gossiped about people going missing. They shifted in sight of it, built knee high walls around it, and told their kids: if anyone invites you into the forest, you run for your life.

Robbie chased after Leo. His feet floated over the dirt, his hands settled in his pockets. The evergreens framed a cut-out of his body.

“Wait,” she slowed as she approached him. The baseball team's stares cut into her back.

Robbie liked to think they found her brave. She liked the way the boys were uneasy, not only with Robbie and Leo going into the forest, but inside themselves. They squirmed in their shorts.

Leo's sly grin slipped from the side of his mouth without taking a single look at Robbie.

“Joining me in the darkness?” His voice had a slight quiver to it.

Robbie shrugged, but her stomach flipped, her hands sweaty, her heart beating too quickly, like a mouse, overwhelmed inside her own body. She pushed all of it down, nursing herself with thoughts of how she would get out alive if something turned up in the forest. She was faster than Leo. He was a gentleman. Neither of them would go in very far. The guys would hear their screams.

“You don't believe in ghost stories?” Leo asked.

She hadn't realized how quiet she was. They were almost to the wall.

“The ball couldn't have gone far,” Robbie replied.

“So, you are afraid of ghosts?” he asked, his eyebrows raised in jest.

She sent him a glare.

“You haven’t heard the stories. There has to be some reason to be afraid of the forest if no one will go in there,” she said.

“There are worse things in the world than things that are already dead,” he pointed out.

Contemplating, she almost tripped over her own feet. Leo let out a hard breath.

“It’s probably the mystery of it.” She wiggled her fingers in the air. “Because you don’t know what’s there. It’s the anticipation. Or there could be bears.”

They reached the wall. Leo hopped over it without hesitation and then stood there with furrowed eyebrows, watching Robbie. His fingers moved around in his pocket, his chest rose and fell. Robbie was about to ask him if he was okay, but he reached out to her right before she opened her mouth, the beginning of a sentence trailed off. His hand suspended in the air.

His eyes fixed to the ground, his other hand still in his pocket. Robbie stared at him for a moment, resisting the urge to check if the other men were still watching them. Her heart lurched. The hand suspended in the air felt like an invitation. His hand reaching out was large, like a wild cat. His fingernails were neatly trimmed, and although a patch of dirt was smudged on his wrist, his hands remained spotless. Robbie wondered if he had wiped them off during the game. John’s fingernails always had thick slices of dirt underneath them.

Robbie touched his fingertips with just the tips of her own. His skin was softer than any man’s she’d ever touched, not that she’d touched many. They were softer than her own, like the smooth skin of a leaf, or the underbelly of a snake. She hopped over the wall, and Leo pulled his hand back to himself, and sunk it swiftly into his pocket.

“Thanks,” she said.

“Not a problem,” he replied.

They were in the forest.

The trees were stout, but thick, their branches tangled together. A growing thicket of moss overhead, shadowed the ground in darkness. The wooded world had been covered in a blanket with scarce rips in the surface, letting light percolate through. The line of the tree's shadows divided distinctly on the ground where the sun touched and then could not reach anymore. The forest, while contained and untouched, echoed with sounds far off in the distance. Sticks breaking, wind moving the leaves, animals shuffling in the underbrush. Robbie tried to pretend like she wasn't afraid. She tried to take the rumors apart. Trees, with leaves just like those outside her parents' house. Dirt, full of worms and rocks and decay, no, not decay, full of life. Full of the roots of the trees. Robbie closed her eyes and could hear water in the distance.

“You alright there? It's darker than nighttime in here.” Leo's eyes never wavered from Robbie.

*I am faster than him.*

“I've got the heebie jeebies. Let's get the ball and get out,” Robbie replied.

*He is a gentleman.*

Leo stepped onto the dark side of the tree line, and the shadow swallowed his body. His long chin, recasting skeletal and hollow.

“It didn't make it far.” He bent over and picked the ball up, dusting off the dirt with the tips of fingers. The trees brushed against him, recognizing him. His lack of fear was jarring and inspiring.

If Leo was fine, Robbie would be fine. In their togetherness, she didn't need to be scared.

She took a step after him, reaching for the ball. He handed it to her, their hands missing each other.

“That wasn’t so bad was it?” he asked, hands returning to his pants. He loomed over Robbie protectively, like the boards of a house.

“When one of those trees starts grabbing for us, I’m throwing you to the wolves,” Robbie replied.

“Fair enough,” he said, “but you are the one who hit the ball out here.”

She ran her fingers over the stitches of the ball. “If you weren’t here the game would be over. We would have gone home.”

He looked amused, his smile tucked into one cheek and his eyes spackled with lightness. “Your hair looks silver in this light.” He took his hat off, rubbing his head.

Robbie's cheeks reddened. She turned back toward the wall to hide them.

“Your hair blends into the darkness. You look bald.”

He belted out a laugh and she could feel him watching her from behind. They stepped back over the wall.

For Robbie, things would be different now. She had stepped into the forest and come back, unwounded, severing herself from a timidness she grew into. From the distance, the boys, Homeplate, the backstop all retracted backwards, seemingly insignificant. A feeling too large for her body to hold onto gripped her heart.

## Chapter 5: Parker, 2005

Parker's mothers' house was covered in dust. Thick wads of it, like you would find in a dryer, clung to the heating ducts and window frames. Every inch had a thick layer of gray. The room reeked, pungently musty. Parker would forever associate the smell with abandonment. Cobwebs hung from invisible finger holds, in the corners they built up into empty nests. Even the empty seashells on the shelves were hiding underneath a coat of filth. As if the house had started to protest, growing thick with disease, as Parker's mother had.

Parker's dad asked her months ago to go to the house and scavenge through boxes for anything she wanted to keep. She avoided and avoided and avoided until he gave her a date. He was selling the house. Since he quit his job to play music full-time, he needed money to pay rent in his studio/temporary home.

Annie walked up the stairs behind Parker and pulled her finger through the film, collecting it on the tip. She wore a yellow summer dress that obtruded against the color of the walls. The dress should have made the room brighter, but the grim walls gave it a duller hue, a mustard.

"When was the last time anyone was in this house?" Annie asked, her voice laced with fake curiosity to mask her disgust. She rubbed her thumb to her finger and scrunched her nose.

"God only knows. I know my dad got a few calls from the police because a bunch of kids were throwing rocks through the windows. I moved out when I was ten," Parker replied.

"She was here all alone?" Annie asked.

Parker did not talk about her mother often, but she did appear, sprinkled in moments Annie latched onto. Parker knew Annie was confused about Parker's family. Her dad and Parker acted so *normal*. For hours she would ask Parker questions and hide a question about her family

in the mix: *what's your favorite body part, have you ever been to the fair, if you could be doing anything anywhere right now what would you be doing? Who would you be with? Do you miss your mom?*

Parker thought herself an honest person, to a fault, but something about her mother brought her great shame. She was embarrassed by her own behavior with her mother, as well as her mother's disease. That embarrassment had been subtle until she came out. Parker felt an innate fear her queer friends would find out about her genetics and cast her out. The community, determined to create a positive image for themselves, had to differentiate from their own and she owed it to the community to present herself as an upstanding member of society. In actuality, she couldn't hold that up.

Parker didn't answer Annie. Down the empty hallway, pictures had been taken off the walls, replaced by dirt-rimmed outlines. Now, the pictures were wrapped in newspaper and tucked away in boxes. Parker's mom filled every corner of the house with pictures of their family; Parker eating chocolate ice cream cones, wearing underwear on her head, standing in between her dad's legs. When her mom ran out of those, she started putting up pictures she had taken at the beach: old seashells, rescinding waves, Parker's dad passed out with a Corona in hand. Her mom couldn't stand the long hall of white walls and Parker understood why. A long way down, no way out, and not a thing to occupy your mind but longevity.

"When did your mom leave?" Annie asked. She passed Parker on the stairs and walked backwards down the hall. Her hands reached out and touched either wall, gliding like an ice skater.

"Dad checked her into Western State in 1993. I had just turned fifteen?" Parker pointed to her mother's room. "It's that one."

The light reflected off the wood floor and cast a small shadow of Annie. Annie waited by the door which still had little white flowers painted over the wood.

Parker took a deep breath, letting the stale air fill her belly. Annie coughed. Her mom's room wasn't as bad as the rest of the house. It awaited Parker, just like she remembered it. A giant duvet covered in rhododendrons tucked over a four poster bed. The giant windows her dad had installed when Parker's mom got sick so she could look outside, the lilac curtains blew in and out the windows in the summer. A tiny side table and folding chair in the corner where a vanity used to sit before her mom smashed it. She used to spend hours in front of that vanity shaping her eyebrows, blushing her cheeks, delicately stroking mascara into her eyelashes, just to go to the grocery store.

Parker kicked a loose nail. It rolled toward the boxes stacked up next to the bed, sagging from the weight of their contents.

"So much dust," Annie said.

"So much crap too." Parker nodded toward the boxes as she opened the big windows. The air burst through as if the wind had been pressing against the glass, waiting to be let inside.

"What is all this?" Annie sat against the bed.

"Your dress is going to be covered in dust," Parker said. "Mom's old books and antiques and stuff. I bet you can find her old radio in there too. There's no way dad would have tossed it."

Parker flipped open the lid to one of the boxes. Inside, yellowing pictures of her grandparents were stacked high, alongside an old cigar box.

"This stuff is cool." Annie flipped through some pages of a book of pressed flowers.

"All of it is useless. My mom used to keep it up in the attic and go rummaging through it every other day looking for a clue as to who was after her or something." Parker pulled out a

picture of a wedding, or it seemed like a wedding because the woman in the picture wore a white dress and the man wore a tux, but it didn't look like there were any other people there. They held each other in front of a lake, the woman grasping onto the man's jacket coat. The woman gazed adoringly at him. The ring on her finger was just a band, but it stood out against her nimble finger.

"Who's that?" Annie pointed at the photo, holding a newspaper clipping in her hand.

"My grandparents if I had to guess. That's my grandpa Sam. That must be my mom's mom. They look so young."

"You don't recognize her?"

"Never met her," Parker replied.

"They look so in love." Annie's eyes warmed.

"We're in love. This is just a picture." Parker threw the picture back in the box.

The cigar box had a gold insignia of a deer. It reminded Parker of the secret gun compartments in James Bond films.

"If I was going to keep anything from these boxes, I would keep this. We could use it for old pictures or the remotes." Parker held the box up, realizing the bottom was blackened, burned.

She opened it up, and it was empty.

"Hey I found the radio," Annie exclaimed, hefting it out of the box. It clanked as it emerged, the antennae still intact, the dials crusted with dirt. "It's ancient," Annie said.

"Yeah, well, that's my mom for you. The radio stopped working multiple times and my mom would take it to a special shop three hours away to get it fixed. She wouldn't even talk about getting a new radio."

"It's gorgeous, how could she?"

“It didn’t work,” Parker said. “She was always keeping things that needed to be thrown away because they filled her empty little heart.”

“Maybe it had some value you haven’t thought of,” Annie replied.

“I bet you it won’t work. She used that thing until it didn’t have any legs left.”

“Let’s try it.” Annie carried it over to the outlet by the bed.

Parker hovered over Annie while she played with the dials. The small red light flickered on, and static blared from the speakers. Annie wiggled her eyebrows at Parker. Voices came through, disrupted and scratchy.

“Well, this brings back terrible memories,” Parker said.

Annie swatted Parker’s thigh and left her hand there. Parker wrapped her hand around Annie’s.

They caught a station playing elevator music and left it.

“She must have been really lonely by herself in this house.” Annie held Parker’s hand tighter.

“Maybe,” Parker replied.

Her mom HAD been lonely. She’d been devastated when Parker finally moved out, crashing through doors, following Parker while she dragged a backpack through each room. Parker’s mom had always had a flair for the dramatic, but the maniacal way she tore after Parker unsettled her, quickened her escape. Parker grabbed at a hair brush, and her mom tore it from her hands. Parker took clothes from the dryer, and her mom ripped them trying to get them out of her hands. Her mom’s sandy hair, curly and wild, hung off her head like Medusa’s snakes. She had gotten so skinny, her cheekbones cut into her face. Still, she wore her make-up. Her fingernails painted a bright red.

*“You can’t leave me.”* She chased Parker all the way out the front door, clinging to her backpack. Her voice rocked the pictures from their nails on the wall until the faces in them stared sideways. Parker pulled her mom out the front door, lightweight as a balloon.

*“Please don’t leave me alone with him.”*

“With who?” Parker had asked, turning on her mother. She never forgot her mom’s face, blinking up, tears falling heavy like paint to the dirt. “With who?” Parker screamed.

It was one of the last times Parker had seen her in her house before her dad had her institutionalized.

The song changed, and old jazz started playing. The saxophone drew out long lonely notes. Parker leaned over to kiss Annie’s cheek.

“We should keep the house,” Annie said.

“This place is haunted. No chance.”

Annie walked over to the table with the radio, placing it in the center, sitting, with her ear pressed against the speaker, her eyes slipping closed, where so long ago Parker’s mom positioned herself. A ghost.

## Chapter 6: Mitchie, 1975

The night was beautiful, full moon, stars lighting up the sky, Mitchie felt the thunderstorm in the air. Electricity connected everything; the earth, the air, the hand on her back. She wanted to sink into it, grind the minerals of the earth in her hands and let the rain drip off her skin.

The flesh of Rex's fingers on the small of her back electrified her like the energy buzzing off of a lightbulb. His jacket smelled like cigarettes, and the smell of man clung underneath. Woody and strong, safe. If Mitchie slept over, she planned to steal one of his shirts and wear it until the smell faded.

Mitchie clung onto his belt loop as he unlocked his tiny little flat. Rex was handsome, with a flat face and kind eyes, thick bushy eyebrows that reminded Mitchie of the cattails around the lake by her Uncle Sam's house. Rex's hair fell around his ears and face like leaves on a plant. Mitchie could tell he played some kind of instrument because of the firmness of his fingers. He threw his keys into a can next to the front door and pulled her in by the hand.

"Sorry about the lighting. When I bought the place I didn't realize there was no light, all I've got are these little Christmas lights."

Rex walked into the room, his shoes lit by blue, green, yellow and red. Little lightbulbs, the size of a fingernail were nailed to all four corners of his ceiling and floor. He had a Bob Seger poster on one wall and a record collection in a box next to a drink cart. A bean bag chair in another corner.

Mitchie was surprised. It seemed like he had some money. Hand woven rugs, enameled wood desk, everything looked brand new. Mitchie pulled her hand out of his, but he didn't

notice, rubbing his head and looking around the room as if checking all of his possessions were still there.

“That’s alright. I like the colors,” Mitchie said.

He took his jacket off, revealing a tight sweater over his broad chest. His chest hair peaked over the collar. Mitchie’s feet were touched by the light, light blue, red, yellow. The colors washed over her. They mixed with the aura around her, mixing into a deep purple, cool, calm, drugged.

She decided she could let go of him being rich because he could be everything else she pictured in a man. Broad and strong, in touch with the music, a bit of a talker. A ragged voice floating in and out of her ears, reminding her she was not alone.

“So, Mitchie.” He grabbed a glass from the cart and poured a shot of whiskey in it. “That a nickname? Or something your mama gave you?” He smiled crookedly with his mouth closed.

“My mom didn’t give me anything. I wasn’t good enough for her to stick around,” Mitchie replied, moving further into the room. She slipped the sandals from her feet and padded across the room after him, drifting like she had seen women do in movies. A little sway of the hips, heavy eyes, her skirt chasing after her legs. Her bangles slipped to the end of her wrist.

“Sore subject?” He made for another glass, but she grabbed his arm and pushed him onto the bean bag, slowly so he could stop her. He didn’t. He flopped down and shyly smiled, revealing a sliver of his teeth, a little crooked, before tucking them away again. Mitchie plopped next to him, not touching, but feeling the energy between them, moving from their mouths into their ears like morse code traveling down power lines.

“No.” Mitchie tucked a small tuft of Rex’s hair behind his ear. It was rough and stuck out. “Just not around.” The bangles on her arm chimed together. It was a sore subject, but she didn’t want to scare him off too quickly as she had with other men, weaker men. Her mother hovered over her like a balloon tied to her wrist, always there, bobbing back and forth, losing air when Mitchie was content, and lifting her off her toes when she wasn’t.

“I didn’t like my old man much. He’s a lawyer, never really understood the music. You know some people just have it.” Rex grabbed Mitchie’s hand and traced the lines on the inside, her life line first, her love line last.

“I sometimes hear music when nothing is playing.” This came out without a thought from Mitchie. Cursing herself, she flexed the fingers in her hand. “That sounded off.”

He would understand. If he was Mitchie’s dream guy, he would understand. And if he didn’t understand she could always say she was kidding. Men forgot things far quicker than women did. Women were locked boxes and men were flimsy rice paper. She could show up at his house and bring Carol’s Potato Casserole and-

“Me too, especially when I play. I can hear it before it even leaves my fingers. It’s like there’s this electricity moving through me, or like somebody is plucking my strings from the inside.” He looked down at her with a closed smile. “Stupid as that sounds.”

“It’s not stupid.” Mitchie smiled adoringly at him so he knew it was alright. She imagined them together, walking down the street at night with his hand in her jean pocket. He would call her beautiful, and she would feel that love, that movie type of love. Maybe she wouldn’t be worthy of it now, but she could be. She would be the best girl he had ever had. And he would be patient.

“Sometimes,” Mitchie paused, “I just hear it, like, jazz music playing. I don’t know. It’s this haunting saxophone. It’s a little creepy, worse than just sitting in silence.”

He didn’t reply. He only nodded and wrapped his arm over her shoulder, enveloping her.

“So, what happened to her? Your mom I mean,” he asked.

A wave of relief. Maybe he didn’t get it, but he wasn’t judging her.

Mitchie used to talk about her mom more, when she was small, differently than the way she talked about her now. She wanted a part of her to linger in herself. She used to ask Sam about her, but he was always too heartbroken. His eyes were always a little wet after she died, like he watched her walk around in front of him, unable to touch or talk to her.

Mitchie definitely didn’t talk about her with women. They would shudder away from her past, changing subjects, avoiding her eyes, talking about her behind her back. Soon, she stopped talking about any of it at all, too many people had turned on her. The silence of it burned her insides to smoke.

“She died when I was five.”

Rex nodded. “You want some tunes?” He reached over, and his arm brushed against her chest. She inhaled slowly.

“Of course,” Mitchie replied.

He picked out a record and put it under the needle. It scratched as it hit the vinyl. A moment of silence and the Beatles floated through the air.

“God damnit, I hate silence.” He downed the rest of his drink.

“Me too.”

“You want to try something?” he asked, his eyes sparkling like cleaned glass. Before Mitchie could agree, he was already moving, pulling something out of an old coffee can and whipping back towards her.

“You ever been high before?”

Mitchie gave him a dubious look, they met at a Bob Marley concert. He cracked a tiny little smile, and his teeth had little yellow stains. He sucked his smile back in quickly and laid back down next to Mitchie.

“Alright here.” He lit the roach and sucked in a deep inhale, his eyes focused on the fire burning at the end. He handed it to her, still lit and she pinched her mouth over it, a little wet from his mouth.

“Take as much of that as it takes.” He got up again and rummaged through a drawer in the kitchen, grabbing a small stereo from the counter and tucking it under his arm. She drew in another breath as he set up the stereo.

“What’re we doing?” She blew the smoke out of the side of her mouth like Cruella DeVille.

“You’ll see. It’s like the opposite of silence.” He put a pair of headphones on her head. She adjusted them over her hair, blunt hanging from her mouth. She didn’t want the wires getting caught in her curls.

Halfway through the joint, she felt a familiar lightness. Or not lightness, a buzzing, a pressure eased and pressed lightly, like when she rubbed her eyes, but all over her body. Her legs pulsed with it. Mitchie hummed and shut her eyes, leaning into Rex’s arm.

“You ready?” Rex said, muffled by the earphones. Mitchie nodded.

He pressed his hands against the earphones, one last time, and the world went quiet. His hands smelled like mud. Then he hit play.

And there it was. The music trapped Mitchie in place. Smooth and easy. Never in her life had she been so connected in the world. Before, none of the sounds fit together. They were always overlapping, a cacophony of yells, whispers, honking, instruments, and in the background this tiny little song only Mitchie ever heard when she was lonely. That was what it was, lonely. This was the opposite. Like whoever was singing sat up with her, drinking a beer at 2 am. The opposite of silence.

Rex leaned over and pressed his mouth to hers.

*I wasn't sure what it would feel like to be kissed. I'd thought about it, since I was small, always wondered at the lips of the boys around, without ambition though. I'd never pursued a lip-lock. Leo wiped his hands on his pants. He showed me the gear on his walls, the large expanse of his yard, the shutters on his windows, with pride. The hunting knives were so much bigger than regular knives, sharper, too. I almost nicked myself on one before Leo jumped at me. Don't touch that, he said. He was protective of me. I don't want to see you get hurt. He put the knife back on the wall, leaning over me. His chest was strong, lean, long. I put my hand on it without thinking, and it was like I was listening to his body hum, like a machine; The thump of his heart, the inhale and shake of breath, a swallow, a step, a touch. Leo leaned over and pressed his mouth to mine.*

## Chapter 7: Bernie, 1953

The last time Bernie went on a first date, her date had to carry her from the rocky coastal beach to his dad's Chevrolet Fleetmaster, where she puked over the side on the gravel road leading up to her house. This time, she was determined to remain sober and coherent.

The Drive In's actual name was *Steak, Shake and Fries*, but Bernie had never seen anyone order a steak there. Old horror movie posters covered the walls, mostly young O-faced women being cradled in the arms of monsters: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *Nosferatu*, *King Kong*. Across from Bernie, her date sipped at his shake noisily, his eyes feasting on the rest of the drive-in. It made Bernie wonder if he had friends there, cheering him on.

"Rockin' Robin" played from the jukebox. "So Bernadette, what are your plans for after you graduate?"

Bernie cringed. "It's just Bernie."

Three girls sat in a group laughing in the corner. They were the type of girls who believed they were ugly because they were not pretty and who were mean to make up for it. Sometimes she thought about Carol that way, although Carol was pretty. She just didn't believe she was pretty, and it showed.

"Alright." He laughed. "Bernie then, what are your plans?"

She sipped on her Coke. "Who knows. That's a ways away."

He nodded thoughtfully. "I'm going to Penn state. My father is a lawyer, and I want to follow in his footsteps."

What Bernie wanted to say was she didn't remember asking, but she kept her mouth shut.

A pan clattered behind the counter in the kitchen.

"I don't want you to think that makes me a jerk, I know lawyers get that reputation."

“Do they?” she asked.

He smiled to himself, and then to Bernie. She couldn’t tell if he was being condescending or he was just happy to talk.

“If you hung out with more lawyers you would get it.”

Condescending.

“Sounds like it wouldn’t be my type of crowd anyways.” Bernie looked around for their waitress.

The waitress approached their table, her hair pulled back into a frizzy ponytail. Cigarette smoke wafted off her. “What can I get you two?”

“I’m going to have a cheeseburger and fries and a vanilla shake.” Her date contemplated more, looking down at the menu. Deciding he didn’t want anything, else he indicated it was Bernie’s turn by pointing at her.

“I’ll just have some fries.” Bernie smiled at the waitress, handing her the menu.

“Just fries? You girls, always watching what you eat.”

“I’m just not hungry.” Bernie smiled at him.

“I eat like a lion,” he announced, patting his belly.

Bernie started to wonder if he was going to ask her more questions. She took a sip of water.

“You know what’s a great place? Randy’s bar. They have such great burgers. I almost wish we would have gone there.”

She nodded her head so he would continue.

“You’re going to love this.” He reached across the table and tapped the hand she had on her glass. “One time at Randy’s I was with a few of my friends and .....

Sip.

Was this really it? Bernie thought. Was this all there was out there?

When Bernie was five, her dad took her out on his motorcycle, a tiny thing, short and skinny, that he used to ride through the streets going five below the speed limit. Bernie would wrap her arms around him, and he would ask her questions into the wind, *How's it going back there? Want to stop?* Bernie would scream her answers at the top of her lungs.

Not far down the road from their house, a hidey-hole hidden by blackberry bush and vines served as the entrance into the woods. The city's landscape was covered in trees, but there was a firm distinction between the city trees and the forest trees. The trees in the forest were bigger, broader, like soldiers standing guard.

On the outskirts of their wooden fence, trails woven in between the trees created a network of channels. Bernie's dad could be seen, pulling his motorcycle out of the shed, stomping on the throttle, and peeling into the small opening. His back faded into the trees, like going down a train tunnel.

Once, Bernie had snuck out to his work shed, peeking between the slats in the door, losing her footing on the divots in the dirt. The motorcycle was leaning against the side of his work bench, covered in dirt. Her bare feet dug into the rocks.

"What are you doing?" Bernie's dad came out with his shining smile. His back pulled back, tense, but his face held easy. He held onto the door of the shed, his wedding band gleaming from the descending sun.

"Nothing," she said. Her stomach dropped.

"It's dark out. Why're you creeping about out here?" He exited the shed, closing it behind him.

“I wasn’t creepin’.”

“Well, what were you doing then?” He walked over to her, placing a hand on her head and pulling Bernie into his leg.

“I was looking around.”

“Looking around?” He crookedly smiled. His hands reached for the motorcycle, pulling it out of the shed and sitting on it.

She nodded, scuffing her feet in the dirt.

“What time’s it?” he asked.

“Momma’s almost done with dinner. I don’t know.” She felt nervous. Earlier, her mom told her to leave him alone. Bernie wasn’t allowed in the shed because there were tools in there that could hurt her.

“That right?” Her dad looked off toward the house. The porch light dangling down, lighting the bushel of flowers growing over the railing of the porch. The house lit up inside, the fireplace in the living room glowing with a fresh started fire, picture frames on the mantel. Bernie loved their house.

Inside everything had its place. Bernie’s dad made sure to keep everything neat and dust free. Even the deer head mounted across the living room wall had its antlers polished once a week. He couldn’t stand it when there was dust anywhere. The only place that was a little dirty was the kitchen because that’s where her mom spent a lot of her time. By the end of the day though, once they had eaten, there were no specks of sauce or little grains. Spick and span.

There were pictures of Bernie as a baby on her dad’s shoulders, towering above the eyeline of the person taking the picture. Pictures of her parents kissing at their wedding, tight lipped and proper.

Every year their family had a porch painting party. They took all their tattered clothes and spent the day covering them in white paint. Her dad would stay out there till night making sure he covered up any spots Bernie left dripping.

“You want to go for a ride?” He raised an eyebrow at her.

“In there?” Bernie pointed to the opening of the forest.

He hopped on the bike. “We’ll go slow I promise. Nothing will happen to you while I’m here. Hop on.”

She crawled on, too quickly because he grabbed her as she started to slip off.

“Hold on tight.” He pulled her hands to his jacket and she scrunched it up in her fists.

He took off, jerking them backward. The motorcycle growled as they turned off the road to the barn and onto the small dirt trail.

As they got closer to the woods, Bernie pressed her nose into his back. His jacket smelled clean. Although it was made of leather, it smelled like cleaning supplies, like apple cider vinegar and bleach. One minute they were lit by the stars and the barn lights and the moon and then nothing. The thicket of trees grew thick, trees growing side by side at the root and morphing into one tree. The leaves whipped across her face, but she couldn't see them. Patches of light illuminated roots on the ground, then just as suddenly they were past them, moving freely in the dark.

“You doing alright back there?” Her dad looked over his shoulder briefly.

He turned tightly into a curve. The air was whipped past her face and stole her breath. It smelled like wet moss. Finally her eyes started to adjust, and she could see the trees, open armed. They smelled like the earth. Bernie loosened her hands from his jacket and leaned back.

It was still dark, uninterrupted. But now Bernie was a part of it. Her dad slowed, taking his time over dirt moguls. There were open doors in between every tree, dark spaces of limitless fascination, and Bernie saw creatures watching her from each space, yellowed glowing eyes.

“I’m not going to tell your mama about this. Are you?”

Bernie’s mom hated the motorcycle. Once, Bernie’s dad had let her ride it all the way down the drive, she lost her balance and her face scraped all up her cheek, scabbing over like the scales of a lizard. Bernie’s dad had hit a tree once, getting stitches down his chin.

“No,” Bernie said. She liked that he was giving her a secret, like they were on the same team, which felt easy since Bernie’s mom never left the house, never explored, never played. Her dad directed their life, and by giving her access, Bernie thought she could help.

He smiled, “Good girl. She’s always making things scary. That’s not me and you right? We see things as they are.”

Bernie nodded, not truly understanding what he was saying, but knowing she wanted to be a part of this world he had created.

The motorcycle purred as he pressed the throttle once again. “We should head back though. Wouldn’t want your mama chasing us in here.”

He went fast, whipping back into the yard, and Bernie felt like the world was falling away under her.

The motorcycle came to a stop in front of their house. Bernie slid from the bike. Her mother was standing on the porch, her wet eyes, tight-fisted hands, illuminated by the porch light.

“Hi, Honey.” Her dad got off the bike.

Her mom's eyes were wide, scared. She pressed up against the wall of the house like a mouse. The apron over her dress was covered in food. Her curled hair was tousled on top of her head.

"Where have you been?" she asked, barely moving her mouth, keeping her body still.

Bernie's dad climbed the steps watching her. "Relax Gal, we were just taking a ride."

"Bernie." She reached out with just her hand. "Come here."

Bernie's feet and legs were covered in grass. Small droplets of blood from snapping twigs welled up.

"Relax," her dad said, harder.

"Bernie." She was staring at Bernie around her dad's shoulder, with wide eyes now. Her hand fell limp, finger by finger.

"I'm alright, mom." Bernie padded up the steps smiling. She was going to be so excited to hear about their ride.

Bernie's dad turned around and raised a finger to his lips.

Right.

"We just went for a ride." Bernie grinned at her.

Her dad stood over her, waiting for her to move out of the way. "What's for dinner?"

"You can't just take her whenever you feel like it, Leo." Her mom's voice cracked. "Did you take her out there?"

Her mom rippled, staring off into the darkness of the woods. She could barely hold herself up, weak against the night. Bernie grabbed onto her hand. Her mom gripped back tightly with both of hers. She would never understand what Bernie and her Dad did. It was safer if she

stayed in the dark. She probably had never felt that back of the motorcycle feeling and she never would.

Bernie pulled out of her hands as they walked inside, falling into step with her dad.

## Chapter 8: Robbie, 1932

Robbie was nervous. Leo moved around his house comfortably, laying his jacket over a chair, adjusting a bow hung on the wall, washing his hands in the sink. An unspoken energy filled the space of the room, expectation for what was to come.

Her dress was plastered to her body making it hard to breathe. She remembered her own mother trying to explain to her what sex was. Her mother, older than most mothers were, teeth yellowed from drinking too much tea, sat on the edge of Robbie's bed, nervously folding a blanket over itself in her lap. Robbie, unused to having her mother in her room, picked up her stuffed bear named Freddy, missing one ear. Her mother fumbled her way through an explanation. A man inserts himself into a woman. Together they make a baby.

"You alright?" Leo sat on the couch.

Robbie nodded, unable to speak. She wanted to feel confident, but Leo and her never had a conversation about it either. It was assumed that after they were married they would consummate, but that didn't leave Robbie with the knowledge of what was to come. It left her guessing, running scenarios in her mind.

"Come here, honey." Leo rolled up his sleeves and wrapped an arm around the couch, revealing a space for her.

Robbie moved slowly, her dress restricting her movements, her nerves coming through her chest in waves. Leo gave her a reassuring smile, and she nestled into his chest.

Leo put his hand over her leg, softly, the softest touch, one of reassurance, one that remained steady in its weight. Robbie's breath stuttered in her chest.

“Look, we can take our time. I’m in no rush.” Leo pretended to yawn, moving his arms over his head. He loosened his black tie, and Robbie could see the peaks of his chest hair in between the buttons on his button down.

Robbie wanted to reach out and touch them. But was scared he would take that as her being ready to start.

Instead, she watched the way his body moved. Men were so different from women. His fingers were rigid and hard, his palms calloused but meaty. His jaw was hard, unfilled as hers was with fat. His shoulders expanded and filled space like the wings of a bird.

“I don’t know what is about to happen,” Robbie said.

Leo’s eyebrows raised. They had never discussed this before the wedding, but Robbie assumed he knew she was inexperienced. The first time he had kissed her she hadn’t moved her lips.

“No one ever told you?”

Robbie shook her head.

“Well, alright, I’ll walk you through it, and if you want to stop, you just say so, alright?”

Leo was warm when he looked at her, his eyes unworried, unrushed. Robbie relaxed her shoulders a bit.

“First things first, gimme a little kiss.” Leo leaned in.

Robbie pecked his lips quickly. He licked his lips into a smile.

“First step is over and done.” Leo nudged her up and off him, moving her shoulders so he faced her.

Leo's hands reached for her, caressing her cheek. His hands smelled like the cake from the wedding, vanilla, watered down to save money. It had been a dense cake, but worth the extra money to see Leo wipe frosting from his lips.

He leaned in and kissed her soft and slow, over and over, until Robbie began to relax. Her eyes lidded.

"Now, I'm going to touch you," Leo's hands moved up and down her arms, the hair on her arms combed back with his touch, goosebumps rising in their wake. He didn't move from her arms until her own hand moved onto his thigh. His hand moved down to the small of her back.

Leo stuttered, and Robbie laughed into his mouth.

"That's my girl," he said, moving the straps of her dress down her arms.

"This dress is suffocating me."

"Let's get it off of you then."

They moved to the bedroom, holding hands. They faced each other the entire way, onto the foot of the bed, off with their clothes.

Robbie's head hit the pillow and he smothered her mouth. His mouth hard, against hers, biting, then smoothing the bite over with his tongue. Her pelvis rose to meet his. He pushed it down with one hand.

"Hold your horses," he said.

Robbie didn't know what was happening to her. She had never been so worked up in her life. Her brain felt cut off from the rest of her body, moving on its own. Of course she had liked kissing Leo before, but it never had such urgency. She never felt like she had to have him, like she wanted him closer still.

He kissed down her clavicle, her breasts, her stomach.

Robbie squirmed.

Leo smiled up at her, his back strong and muscular, flexed like a large cat. He lowered his head over her center and kissed there, once.

Robbie put her hand in his hair.

His tongue moved through her, and her back lifted off the bed.

Later, sitting up at the kitchen table with Leo, sipping hot coffee and looking out the window to their cabin, Robbie tried to remember who she was before she met Leo. Her life felt like a steady beat, with little bursts of intensity. Finding out a woman could fly a plane, getting into a car for the first time, seeing a bear wandering across the acres in the backyard, small moments to break the monotony. Even meeting Leo had been a small blip, maybe harder than other blips. Their wedding night burned through each pulse and took on a life of its own. She didn't know she had that kind of feeling inside of her. Sexual, bright, porous with her body, letting the feeling wash through her. She wanted it again and again.

Robbie felt like she was staring into the face of god, knowing she was capable of feeling such monstrosity within her.

## Chapter 9: Parker, 2005

After the man in the mirror, things started to get weird. Parker was not the type of person who enjoyed being scared. She avoided scary movies, refused to consider sky diving a hobby, and on Halloween she ran the door, handing out candy to little kids. Which was how she knew she was dreaming, because she never would have gone into the basement.

She recognized it as her mom's basement, but it was different. Her mom used to use it as a light room for her photographs, and lines of wire were nailed across the ceiling. Wet baths pressed against the walls. But those were gone. The baths were ripped from the walls, and in their place were a dozen dog kennels.

In the dark, Parker could see the mold creeping up the corners on the walls. Someone chipped at the cement walls and remnants were sprinkled across the floor. Panic filled the back of Parker's chest deflating every time she took a breath, and for a minute, it was all she could focus on.

The locks on the doors of the kennels were rusted a deep orange, and the metal bars were bent out of shape as if someone had tried prying them apart. Parker walked down the hallway. Along the walls weapons hung on the branches of deer antlers, a hunting knife, a rifle, a crossbow. Parker could have been walking for hours. She wasn't going anywhere.

At the end of the cages a door was open. A screen covered the doorway, the kind that kept bugs from coming into the house. Light reached into the basement from the screen. Green stains warped the walls, the mold ascending upward. A scratching sound chattered like radio static, small whimpers and harsh breathing and bursts of yelling.

Movement sounded from inside the kennels, but it was too dark to see inside. Parker wanted to run, but scared herself with the quick movement. She didn't want to miss whatever it was that was scaring her, wherever it lingered.

Parker leaned down, careful to look over her shoulder, to see what animal was in the cage. A woman grasped in between the grate, her mouth dropped open to scream, a small gurgling came out, along with spit.

Parker's back hit the wall. The hair on her neck stood on end and she clutched at her chest, pressing herself as far away from the caged woman as possible.

The woman's skin was tinged blue, certainly not alive, but not dead, made apparent by the small scream she let out as she pressed herself against the cage. She looked at Parker with empty porcelain eyes and deep dark circles. Her mouth mumbled through chapped lips. Lifeless, yet her limbs moved.

In the next cage over, fingers pressed out, reaching toward Parker.

The woman in front of Parker pressed herself back against the wall, body completely still, leaning against the wall of the kennel with her eyes wandering. Parker felt someone watching her, or felt like it would be the opportune moment for someone to be watching her. She flipped around, looking back the way she came.

Photographs hung from the wires. The antlers and weapons were gone.

Pictures of little girls, running through grass fields, holding lady bugs in their hands, playing together, a lone girl dipping her face into a creek. None of them had faces.

One of the caged women started whimpering. The room sank darker. She cowered in the corner, her face tucked into her hands. The light from the screen door reached out further, and flickered like someone was walking on the other side. Parker couldn't scream. She couldn't see.

Then suddenly, the woman turned back to Parker. Concern flipped her to the front of the cage, her hand reaching through the grate. Her fingernails glimmered with red polish chipping off.

A shadow rose from behind Parker, rising over the caged woman's face. Parker started to turn but the shadow grabbed her by the throat.

Parker shot up in bed, her own hands touching at her throat, shaking, the air expanding and retracting. She tried to gasp for air, but the pressure was still there on her neck. Her body was paralyzed.

The warmth of Annie next to Parker helped. She could see Annie's chest moving. She was breathing. Annie's bare, pregnant belly poked out at the sky.

Parker shut her eyes tightly, moved a finger, inhaled through her nose. Her chest rose, her chest fell. She calmed herself.

She caught a glimpse of him. The same guy Parker had seen in the mirror. And she swore she had seen him somewhere else, too.

"Park?" Annie whispered.

Parker still couldn't catch her breath. The lack of oxygen burned in her body. She grasped at the sheets, a drop of sweat rolling underneath her chin.

"Parker, what's wrong?" Annie struggled to sit up over her bump. She rocked twice before lifting and touching the back of Parker's neck, slick with sweat. She pulled back and placed her hand on Parker's t-shirt.

"Jesus Christ," Parker said.

"Park?" she repeated, waiting patiently. Parker began to hiccup.

Sleep was still prevalent in Annie's eyes. Parker shifted away from her, feeling the ghost of the hand on her throat still. Annie slipped her hand back into her lap.

“One sec,” Parker breathed. Annie waited patiently.

“I had a dream that there was this guy keeping girls in cages in my mom’s studio.” Parker rubbed at her neck. Annie didn’t reach for her again, but she softened, listening.

Annie shifted onto her elbow. “I thought you were having a stroke.”

“The guy, he had me by the throat, I felt like I couldn’t move.”

Annie ran her finger over Parker’s throat, tickling the skin. “Just a bad dream, the only person touching your throat now is me.” Annie smiled, warm and sweet. Parker’s eyes welled with tears. The moment urged a protectiveness from Parker, for Annie, for the baby.

“It felt real, realer than any dream I’ve had before,” Parker said. “It wasn’t just the being choked, it was the happiness radiating from the guy. I mean just ecstasy.”

Parker put her hand over Annie’s belly. Her palm warmed.

“Just a dream.” Annie put her hand over Parker’s. “I’m here to protect you.”

They kissed. Annie rolled back over.

His face replayed in Parker’s mind, amplified by the horror and the despair she felt laying there. The dream reminded her of her mom, especially toward the end, before the institution, while they were still at the house. Before Parker moved in with her dad. Before her mom started to look old. When she would wake up from her sleep, cradled in Parker’s father’s arms after waking herself and everyone else up from her screaming. “His eyes, his eyes, his smiling horrifying mouth.”

## Chapter 10: Mitchie, 1976

The sun was hidden behind the trees tucked outside the streetlamps, and Mitchie was the only one left. All the clinicians at the hospital had left for the night. The last order of business to attend to was turning out the lights and emptying the garbage cans underneath the desks, yet Mitchie did not get up from her chair. Her eyes closed, she leaned her head back over her office chair and took deep, even breaths. She did not think she had ever been so tired in her entire life.

Her husband was working a job out of town. There would be no one to pick her up. She had put off learning to drive because it scared her, and it made her feel cared for when Rex drove her around in his dingy Ford truck, the window rolled down, and the faded smell of leather. She enjoyed being alone in a small space with another person, being taken somewhere.

Mitchie sat up, the trails of doctors and nurses lingered on the counters, and back rooms where they stored the beds for the patients. An apple core, medical notes, a mug with cold coffee from that morning. Mitchie missed her house. Truly, she missed the house from her childhood, before her mother had left it to rot away in the wet winters of Washington while she flitted into the woods with Sam. The house was falling apart, and Mitchie wished she could fix it. She wished she cooked, she cleaned, and Rex made enough money for the two of them. They could go to the beaches on the weekends.

Pushing herself out of her chair, her chest bounced. Her breasts hurt. The last few weeks she had noticed them growing. Rex said they were “bigger than he’d ever seen them”. Mitchie hadn’t had a period that month. She knew it would happen eventually, yet she found herself surprised by the immediacy of it. One minute she had been interviewing for this job and then the next, well.

She didn't think she was ready. The wedding had happened only seven months prior. It was a fine occasion, with pink flowers, white champagne, and a lovely view of the white-capped mountain in the distance. Sweet, perfectly fine, small. Just Carol and Rex's parents, who would not speak directly to Mitchie when they shook her hand.

The wedding was rushed, but what else was she to do? She got older every day and she was tired of being on her own.

Spring spotted the streets, rain glistening against the spotlight, glowing green, yellow, and red. A little girl with dark black hair wailed and shrieked from a stroller across the street. Her face purpled. The girl's mother walked by unbothered. Mitchie got up to turn off the lights and locked the door behind her.

She wasn't wearing the proper shoes for the weather. The water seeped into the soles and soaked her socks. Her bag hung low on her shoulders, rendering a shadow of a hunchbacked creature. In one motion, she pulled an umbrella from her bag and collapsed it forward and over her head.

Words swirled around in Mitchie's mouth, never taking hold of any wall: a baby. A tiny baby boy. A sweet little bundle. Mom, mama, mommy. Mother.

Rex would be supportive, despite his overhanging seeds of doubt-that maybe they should not have gotten married- and Mitchie had always wanted a family. Someone to love her, despite.

But wanting a child was not the same as wanting someone to love you. And Mitchie did not know the difference quite yet. In time, she would come to realize, children are people, and people, cruel as they are, were not made for unconditional love.

Her mother's house was just a mile longer down Pacific. Mitchie sat on the curb. A car drove by. Puddles shook at her feet.

There was always the other option, if Mitchie wanted to take it. Rex's father would take care of it without hesitation. She knew he hoped she would run off, or Rex would divorce her. Sad, because in spite of their faults, they were good together, Kind together, to one another. That was the problem with humans though, they just wanted too much. All of them were selfish, guided by their own proclivities and madness. Everyone wanted the world, including her, including Rex's father, even the child waiting in her belly. Once born, it would want and want and want and ache and ache and ache and it won't stop. It would learn that love is not love, but longing. That its hands won't stop digging, its eyes won't stop searching, its throat won't stop being dry.

Wanting was always going to be Mitchie's problem. Mitchie thought about the rocking chair dripping in her dorm room. She pictured the woman's eyes, like an elk at the end of a gun, then, relief.

Mitchie didn't know what she would do with relief.

For now, she walked home, opened the door, ignoring the scratch marks around the keyhole. Placed her umbrella on the porch. Took off her coat. Made an appointment with her doctor. Told her husband, who hugged her, and together they cried on the wood floors of their kitchen. They had their baby, a beautiful girl.

As they raised it, Mitchie pictured herself, old and tired, when she was done being hungry for other things on this earth; her daughter tucking her into her bed, and Mitchie would have her fill.

## Chapter 11: Bernie, 1954

A ghost pushed his way past Bernie, knocking her into a witch who grabbed her by the shoulders and laughed in her face, smelling like punch. Bernie turned her head and laughed along with her.

“Sorry!” she yelled over the music.

The witch shook her head and smiled, walking away toward another group.

She looked over the heads of everyone at the poker club, the bodies blurred together. Bernie was dressed as Natalie Wood from *Rebel Without a Cause*, a long tan jacket and brown pants cinched at her waistline. The bottoms of her legs on full display. There were a few James Dean’s around the party, but she was the only Natalie Wood.

Ernie came around wearing his Davy Crockett costume, the raccoon hat twirling around his abnormally small head. Bill and Fred had been coming up behind him and pulling the hat over his eyes all night, so Ernie’s head swiveled back and forth tracking them. His drink sloshed over the sides of his hands and onto Bernie’s shoes.

“Have you seen Carol?” Bernie yelled.

Ernie shook his head. His gap-toothed smile exposing his pink gums.

“What’s she dressed as?” he asked again. He had asked at least three times previously, including when Carol was in front of him. Bernie couldn’t tell if he thought the question was funny to ask or if he was drunk and genuinely could not recall. She shook her head at him and walked toward the back room where the music got louder, and the lights darker.

In the front room, a small gathering of the people just arriving and the people who needed air stood around, a mixture of the sick and the excited. The real party was in the back, down the stairs, to the basement where the band was playing and the bottles of liquor were hidden in secret

cellar doors that could only be accessed if you knew which floorboard to pull up. Bill, dressed as a cowboy that night, his mustache thick and gelled, once told her that was how he made some of his money. He went into different bars and built these secret locks for bar owners, so they could keep having parties while prohibition was happening. Bernie didn't know how old Bill was, but he had crow's feet around his eyes.

Bernie pushed her way past lions, a Peter Pan, another James Dean. Walking down the stairs into the darkness that intensified the further down she went.

Down here, she couldn't tell who was black or white. The band was rowdy, sweating, jerking while they played. Perspiration dripped onto the makeshift stage, a small corner the party had formed a barrier around.

Bernie walked up to the long bar. It reached across the expanse of the room from one end to another, and to get behind it, a panel needed to be lifted. She reached over the top, and grabbed a bottle of whiskey, popping the cork off with her mouth.

"Bernie girl!" Stephanie Walker pinched her sides, a few girls trailing behind her. She couldn't tell what they had come as because their costumes were mussed up, but she could tell Stephanie had been a housewife from the apron hanging from her neck and her hair, pinned to the top of her head. Not much of a stretch from her regular life.

"Have you seen Carol?" Bernie asked into Stephanie's ear then swigged from the bottle.

Stephanie nodded. Her red cheeks reminded Bernie of Santa Claus.

"She's bobbing for apples," Stephanie yelled, pinching Bernie's cheek.

Bernie offered her the bottle. Stephanie took a swig of it and wrapped an arm around Bernie's waist. "I'll help you. It's impossible in this crowd."

Couples danced, swinging each other around recklessly, running into other people and spilling drinks all over the ground, sliding around in it. No one cared. Everyone was sweating so much it just didn't matter.

Stephanie pulled Bernie through the crowd by the hand. Her nails were painted a bright yellow. Bernie always liked Stephanie. She was a few years older, and had three kids, but never acted like it. She liked money, married a rich guy from the city, and they came back to their hometown to settle down, but she never did. She made it seem so easy to be two things at once.

"Carol!" Bernie shouted, raising her arms in the air like they hadn't seen each other in years. Carol beamed at her from behind a man sticking his head in a giant barrel that used to hold whiskey.

"Bernie!"

Carol was dressed as Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz. She'd had a blue dress already and wore two long ponytails, all she needed was red shoes. It was a shabby costume, rolled together last minute, but Carol had been carefree that night. It was a rare occasion for the two best friends to both be in a good mood for a night out, but a reminder for Bernie as to why she was friends with Carol. Carol could be fun when she wanted to.

Bernie hopped into her arms from Stephanie's as if she was being handed off.

"Thank you for the escort." Bernie said to Stephanie.

Stephanie winked at her. "Anytime." She walked back to her group of gabbing gals.

"What are you doing?" Bernie wrapped her arms around Carol's middle. She smelled like Carol, and it reminded Bernie of late nights in their shared bedroom, huddled up reading each other's diaries.

“Watching people bob. Gun Foundry threw up because they put the apples in a barrel of whiskey instead of water.”

Bernie peeked into the barrel to confirm, indeed, Bill had truly outdone himself. A brown liquid muddled by the bobbing red skin of apples. A crowd circled around the barrel, waiting their turn, or watching for someone to get a bite.

“Have you tried yet?” Bernie asked.

Carol shook her head vehemently. Bernie guessed she was scared she would make her try, but she didn’t want to ruin the night by forcing Carol to do something that would put her in a mood.

Bernie nodded. “Should I try?” She grinned.

Carol nodded.

“Alright out of the way!” Bernie yelled, shoving and bumping hips with the other’s around the barrel. The man who had previously been bobbing gave her a dirty look behind his wet whiskey covered face. The other people standing around cheered.

Carol followed her, grabbing her hair and pulling it away from her face.

“Watch and learn, boys.” Bernie looked down into the bucket. The apples twirled around, their stems breaking the surface.

The whiskey inside the barrel reflected the light coming from the tiny windows of the basement, turning the whiskey golden. Bernie dunked her head, just enough to submerge her face. She wrapped her mouth around the skin of an apple, and dunked her head down, unable to get a grip. She dunked further, her ears sinking below the surface.

The music faded to just beats and cymbals. Carol's hand in her hair pulled it back gently. Bernie tried to bite down, but the apple slipped from her mouth and the whiskey flooded her mouth. She blew it out, bubbles traveling to the surface.

Her dad used to love bubbles, out of character for such a serious man. He would put soap in pans, take her out into the yard, and they would spend hours blowing bubbles from in between their fingers. While she played, her dad would tell her stories about his own childhood, and she would run around, pretending like she was just a kid, ignoring the adults and having fun. She was listening intently though, grasping at any semblance of information that she could pocket about her dad..

One story, he had told her more than once, was about his own dad, who was a preacher at the church a town over. He had to move a town over because he had also been a drunk and had been banished from the church in town for peeing his pants in front of the congregation.

“A coward is what he was. Weak. Once I was walking home from school, almost home too, just a yard or two away, and this dog came running out from behind a fence. Some kind of shepherd. I ran because I was just a kid, but it got me, bit my leg right through my jeans, and the whole time I was screaming and screaming. I looked around for help and I see my dad sitting there frozen on the porch, looking like he might pee his pants again. My mom comes barreling out of the house like a maniac. She was really sick most of my life, so her being out of bed at all was a sight. Her legs were like loose rubber bands, so she ran funny. It wasn't till she started coming out to help that my dad moved, trying to grab her and pull her away from the dog, away from me. Eventually he ended up kicking that dog in the head, but I had 30 stitches.”

Bernie's teeth sunk into an apple stem, barely holding on in between her two front teeth. She had it. She tried to pull her head up, but the hand on her neck had somehow changed without

her knowing. It was larger, meatier. She tried again to lift her head from the whiskey, but the hand held her down, fingers digging into her hair. She couldn't breathe, opened her mouth, swallowed whiskey, and gagged under the water.

Then the hand was gone.

Bernie lifted her head and gasped for air.

"What the hell, Ernie!" Carol was swatting at Ernie, hard, her face bright red, her arms reared back to swing.

Ernie was laughing behind her, his hat gone. "I was just kidding."

Bernie turned around and slapped him across the face.

Ernie was stunned. His mouth hung open, and his face turned an uncomfortable bright red.

"Who do you think you are?" Bernie's whole body was shaking.

Ernie looked at the ground. "Sorry, Bern, it was-"

Across the room, Bill was shoved to the ground and everyone stopped, including the band.

A group of around ten men filed into the room, all dressed in white sheets, all dressed as Klansman.

The black people in the room were clear as day now, easy to spot. Scared all to hell, they grouped together toward the back.

The Klansman were carrying torches, lit brightly with fire. The fire reflected from their eyes, projecting the lines of anger pinching their skin. The holes cut from the sheets were crooked, almost squares.

The Klansmen were not from Puget. They traveled far to get there, a three-hour day journey, evident from their boots, caked in red dirt instead of the slippery mud caked onto the bottoms of the rest of the men around. These men had heard about the club from Bill's parents, in a small town by the Washington Gorge. Bill's parents who had come to visit him the month prior and who, by default of business, were introduced to the club.

Bernie found all of this out later. But she knew they were not from around Puget because all the Klansman in their town were either in the crowd, facing their brothers dressed as cowboys and farmers right there, or they were the police who turned a blind eye to Bill because they wouldn't know how to take any of that seriously, even if they wanted to. Their town was too small, there wasn't enough to get angry about.

The white sheets did not speak, but their eyes danced around the room, everyone staring back. The room divided in half, the party standing in front of the white sheets, sweat pooling at the tops of their foreheads. The Klansmen blocked the door. Suddenly Bernie imagined them dropping the torches one by one, the flames licking up the whiskey covering the floor, heat slithering up, and around their legs, the screams of all of them pounding at the door. No one would hear them outside until it was too late.

Bernie looked up and next to her was Bill's partner. She had never spoken to him before. He looked angry, his lips pursing in and out, his hands clenched and unclenched. His face was worn from too much sun, spotted and damaged with freckles. He looked like he was ready to throw punches.

Bernie's head swirled. Drunk, she was trying to raise herself on her tiptoes to see over the heads of the hall. She swayed, tipped into Bill's partner who flinched. She felt him breathe out sharply.

“Sorry,” she whispered, lifting herself away from him.

He stared at her, his face confused, no longer angry, not necessarily scared. She snapped him out of a state of rage, back to earth, like he had been ready to put that rage to good use, and Bernie had instead, poked a hole in the back of him, let it pour out.

One of the Klansmen, who’s eye holes looked like they were cut with a serrated knife, stepped forward. A woman yelped in the back. Bernie was hyper aware of his shoes, splashing through a puddle on the ground.

He looked directly at her, or maybe he was looking at Bill’s partner. They were standing so close, she couldn’t tell.

“What’s going on here?” the Klansman said, his red beard poking through the hole for his mouth.

Silence.

Bernie took a step forward, not because she was going to do or say anything, but because once again, her head was spinning. She needed to get to the bathroom now.

Bill’s partner’s hand shot out, grabbed her elbow, but she was too far out of his reach. Everyone’s eyes in the room turned to her.

“Bernie,” Carol whisper-shouted.

“Sorry.” Bernie’s stomach gurgled. “Sorry, sorry. I need a bathroom.”

A laugh burst forth from the red-haired Klansman. The laugh was cruel, raspy, like a man laughs at a woman when he thinks of her as a child.

“Fellas.” Ernie moved forward through the pack, his raccoon hat held tightly in his hands, his cheeks a bright red. “What can we do for you?”

“You can go on home. We don’t need parties like this here. We won’t have it.”

Bill stepped up toward the sheets, his lips hidden behind his mustache. “We don’t want any trouble. Look, let’s go talk outside. You’re scaring the ladies.”

The Klansman shook his head.

“No. This party is over.”

Bernie lurched forward, her stomach following the movement, spilling out onto the floor. The vomit diluted with whiskey and beer.

“I need a bathroom.” She walked forward and the Klansman took a step backward, bumping into another one. Bernie was slipping in the puddle.

“Somebody grab her.” Another sheet came forward, reaching, but Bernie slapped at his hand. Her stomach turned again, her neck craned back and she heaved again, coating the arm reached out to her.

“Ugh!” He pulled back and his torch flickered.

“Come on.” Bill put his hand on the other man’s shoulder. Toe to toe they were the same height, same weight, but Bill was significantly more muscular. He seemed more dangerous, in the tall way he held himself. “Let’s go talk outside, we don’t want any trouble.”

The man, his arm being held tightly in Bill’s, looked behind Bill to see the fear had left the eyes of the other party-goers as well. Now they all stepped up, eyeing him. Outnumbering them. Ready to pounce.

The Klansman Bernie puked on shoved her away. Bernie, trying to hold herself up, fell back into the arms of Carol.

The red-haired Klansman nodded, making a hand signal for his men to file out. One by one, the torches disappeared through the door. Bill followed them without looking back.

“Bernie, you really have good timing, you know that?” Carol was grabbing strand after strand of Bernie’s hair and tucking it behind her ears.

“You need help?” Bill’s partner asked, his hands moving back and forth as if he meant to lift Bernie up. Carol shook her head, hoisting Bernie up underneath her arm. “No, thank you. We’re used to it.”

Bernie wrapped her arm around Carol, as if she were a small child. She let Carol take her to the bathroom, wash the vomit from her hair in the sink, and take her home.

## Chapter 12: Robbie, 1933

Tiny plants bloomed in the window of the store. Leaves drooped over the side of their pots, spilling over onto the shelves. Through the window, kids were running along a chain link fence to an elementary school across the street. Their fingers wrapped in the fence and they screamed at one another. The school building was uniform, faded brick, and square.

“I’m headed to the back, Rob.” Leo pointed to a curtained room where someone played a piano.

“Alright.”

Leo squeezed past Robbie, smacking his lips against her cheek.

Robbie had little interest in music, which she had thought after she found out how much Leo loved jazz would be a point of contention. Instead, Leo enjoyed having the jazz to himself. Before they were married he spent a lot of time going to clubs to hear the music. His first instinct, wherever they went regardless of the crowd, was to make his way to a jukebox, and find the one jazz song at the back of the book. Collective groans ensued. Leo would sit back down across from Robbie, watching her eyes, waiting for some form of recognition, and when he found none, he sat back satisfied.

“Can I help you with something?” a young man asked while fingering his way around shelves, placing books back where they belonged.

“Oh no, my husband is the one.” Robbie pointed to the back.

The man licked his lips and tilted his head. “Let me know if you change your mind.”

Robbie nodded at him, tilting her head to the ground.

The rest of the shop was empty. A tight winding staircase led to what Robbie assumed might be a loft space, or an attic. The overhead lights were covered with some sort of black cloth, a fire hazard waiting to happen. Wooden chairs were dispersed throughout to sit and read.

Leo left the curtain open when he went to the back. He sat in a chair, his legs splayed out in front of him, his head tilted back to the wall. The piano slowed, ran soft. Robbie could tell Leo liked the song by the way he pulled at his ear, opening it so the sound could slip in better.

Robbie made her way toward him, tired and hungry.

“Good one Honey?” she asked, leaning against the doorway.

He was slow to look up, his eyes falling up, his nostrils twitched. “Yeah, he’s alright.”

“Mighty fine,” Robbie said back to him.

“You find anything you like?”

She shook her head and crossed her arms.

“No?” he grinned and stood. “Nothing here that interests you?” He sauntered over to Robbie, slow, cat-like.

Robbie laughed. The bell on the door chimed at the front of the store.

“Maybe one thing.”

Leo leaned over and kissed Robbie, soft and sweet. She leaned into him, he pulled back a bit. His eyes were open as he looked directly over her shoulder.

“Aw that’s Jim Doogan over there,” he said.

Robbie turned, but saw no one but a small squinty-eyed woman talking with the cashier.

“Where?”

Leo walked around her, handing her his wallet as he went. “Across the street. I’m going to go say hello. Here.”

Before she had a chance to reply he was gone.

Robbie could have gone with, had he invited her. But he hadn't. So she wandered to the front desk, back to the plants. Leo was always leaving Robbie behind. At first, it felt like he was giving her the freedom to be on her own, but lately his lack of consideration elicited the burning of being brushed off.

*Was this what marriage was supposed to be like?*

Robbie and Leo worked well together, like a sewing machine. He was the needle, pressing and pulling and threading. And Robbie was the wheel, turning slowly, constant. And together they worked. He spent time fixing up his old bike while Robbie sang songs in the kitchen. He made love to Robbie at night, and she pressed her hands to his back urging him closer. Leo hunted deer, and Robbie cooked the meal.

Then, he went outside to talk to Jim Doogan, and Robbie waited for him in the shop.

Outside, the spring flowers were blooming. Daffodils and Tulips lined the sidewalks. Cherry blossom trees had just passed their season, and the remnants of their flowers lay rotting brown on the ground. Leo was leaning up against the fence, his fingers hooked into the chain link.

Leo squinted at a little girl on the other side of the fence. Her hair was pulled back into a low ponytail and she glanced at the ground, her friends off in the distance, the teacher in the corner.

Robbie left the record shop. The bell chimed her exit.

Leo was tall, his shadow cast onto the ground prolonged an extra three feet longer than he was, eating at half the girl's face. Robbie walked over fresh, wet cherry blossoms.

The second the sunlight touched Robbie, Leo waved her over. The little girl ran, making her way to her friends with untied shoes.

He met Robbie halfway into the street.

“Where did Jim go?” Robbie stopped.

Leo reached into his pocket and pulled out a lighter. He flicked it, lighting it and then closing the lid to extinguish it.

“He had to run to his car. He parked it in the middle of the street to run his lunch to Mary.” He stepped into Robbie, the lighter being flicked open and closed in between them.

She nodded, watching his hands, the sleeves of his sweater, the shadow over his cheeks.

“You alright?” he asked.

A gust of wind wrapped Robbie’s hair around her face and into her mouth. She pulled it out. “What were you and that girl talking about?”

Leo pulled back his lips into a white grin. “Mary?”

Robbie nodded.

He looked back over his shoulder at the fence. “I was just asking her about the usual kids’ stuff. How’s school and what not.” He flicked the lighter shut and put it back into his pocket.

He reached out and grabbed onto a strand of hair whipping around Robbie’s face and tucked it behind her ear. “Makes me want one,” he whispered.

A kid. That was something Robbie never thought she would hear him say. Leo hated a dirty house, people grabbing at him, blood, and messy food. When they got married, her cousin Stacy brought her baby to the reception, and it wailed the whole time. Leo had complained aggressively about the noise. He hadn’t stopped to admire the way it slept when it calmed down.

“You want a dirty little baby?” Robbie smirked.

Leo pecked her lips. “They’re so small. Besides, you’ll make sure it’s clean.”

Robbie’s stomach filled with the idea. Robbie didn’t know if she could handle being pregnant. She hated the idea of a person growing inside her, but what she hated more was the anticipation of the pain she would go through. Nine months, waiting for a baby to be big enough to rip her in half. That’s how she imagined it. The baby at the wedding had been small, but not small enough.

If she didn’t have a baby, people would talk, wonder about their marriage, her fertility. Leo would wonder what was wrong with their marriage.

Leo started to walk, wrapping his arm around Robbie’s shoulders and herding her toward the sidewalk. “Think about it: me, and you, and a little boy, in that house. I can teach him to hunt, and together we would catch twice as much.”

“That’s true.” Times were desperate in their town. Leo and Robbie sat fine because Leo’s main source of income was deer meat. He made enough to buy butter and flour, but just the week before the Dawsons were evicted from their farm. One minute they had been trading Leo for steaks, giving him eggs, cloth, and blackberries their kids gathered in the woods. The next, Leo and Robbie drove past their house on the way to town and it quaked with their leaving, doors open, button ups ripped from clotheslines. They even left their dog chained up. His lone bark echoed through the woods for days.

“As long as you still love me the most.” Leo smiled.

“Of course.” Robbie squeezed his hand.

Robbie pictured it. Sitting in front of their fireplace. Leo in one chair reading a book. Robbie sitting in a rocking chair, a blanket over her lap and a cherry faced baby screaming in her arms.

## Chapter 13: Parker, 2006

Parker walked to the therapist's office, so she had time to think. From her apartment, the walk was only twenty minutes, and in that time she wrote a list in her head about what she wanted to bring to her new therapist. Since she had never been to therapy before, she only knew what to expect based on the Sopranos, and overhearing her mom tell her dad her therapist thought she was crazy.

The list went as follows:

Talk about baby.

Talk about Annie.

Bring up the dreams, as dreams, not as visions.

She walked into the waiting room, disappointed she was the only one there.

Her dad tried to force her into therapy when she was five, thinking watching her mother lose it was going to make Parker lose it. She didn't retain a lot. She remembered they had little candies with Peter Pan on them, but she couldn't recall what the therapist looked like, or what they talked about. Her dad shielded her from most interactions with her mother. Of course she saw some moments, but she had her dad to fall back on, always there trying to step in between.

Parker got a form from the front desk. She filled out the form, checking no for every single box except the "Are you going through a big life change". The receptionist took back the form without looking up.

"You can go on in."

The therapist sipped a Starbucks cup precariously behind a desk. The steam floated into his face. He looked younger than Parker, with girlishly long eyelashes.

"Parker, right?" he asked.

“Hi, yes.”

He gestured to a seat across from him, not a lounge chair like Parker had imagined it would be.

“How are you?” he asked, setting some papers aside.

“I’m good.” Parker pulled at her sleeves.

He smiled. “Good! What brings you in today?”

Parker stared at him, “I mean I don’t know.”

He adjusted, pushing at his glasses, “Well, why did you make an appointment?”

“I’m having a baby,” she said.

“Are you?” he glanced at her, surprised.

“Well, I’m not my partner.” Parker watched his facial expressions for any signs of unease, but he kept on smiling. Parker thought he wasn’t blinking enough, his eyes remained wide, focused.

“That’s exciting news, how do you feel about it?”

“Excited,” Parker said. “But I came here because I’ve been having really horrible dreams. and I need to get rid of them, because I can’t sleep.”

“What kind of dreams?”

“Bad ones, I see this guy following me around, grabbing my neck.” Parker wrapped a hand around her neck and stuck her tongue out.

“Hm.” He picked up a pen and paper. “Do you know this man?”

“No, but it’s been the same guy,” Parker replied.

“Maybe he’s from your past? A friend of your father’s?”

Parker thought about her father's friends, long bearded, motorcycle jacket wearing, bus bandmates. They used to have fire's at her dad's friends Jeremy's house, but Parker was always forced to hang out with his son Pete, instead of with the adults.

"Definitely not."

"You have a good relationship with your father then?" he asked.

Parker watched him, nonchalantly writing notes. "Yes. We have dinner every Sunday."

The therapist nodded. "And your mom?"

Parker grimaced. "She's dead."

"I'm sorry." He cleared his throat awkwardly.

"Don't be, she had issues. My dad always said it was just her hormones. I mean that obviously wasn't it, but you know. It was a long time ago."

The therapist laughed, "Well, that's not the right way to look at it."

"How so?" Parker bucked up, watching his face.

"That's just not a very smart thing to say, to blame something like that on hormones."

"He wasn't serious."

"Well." the therapist still smiled to himself, as if he knew something that Parker didn't.

Parker stood immediately, her face flushed with anger. "He didn't mean it like that, he's not an idiot."

The therapist reached across the space to settle her, "I'm sure you're right."

Parker scoffed. Her chest hurt, she tried to breathe deeply, but the air got stuck in her throat. She gathered herself and walked straight out the door, not bothering to say goodbye to the receptionist. She didn't stop until she was down the street. The entire time clutching her fists at her sides. A droplet plopped onto her skin as she turned down the street over a long hill,

overlooking the water. Ahead of her an abandoned seminary loomed on the cliff's edge of the hill.

The seminary had been abandoned for years. Moss and ivy overgrew the brick of the building, tangling around each individual block, and reaching back into the ground on the other side of the wall. Behind the seminary, a long, factory-esque greenhouse overlooked the water. The seminary stood tall, covering the sun, and casting a dark shadow over the rest of the subtly flourishing grass yard. It shielded even some of the sidewalk, casting itself over Parker. The sky grayed with the thought of rain.

Parker's body weighed heavily as she walked, her body distanced itself from her mind. She floated over it, drifting in and out, unaware of the atmosphere around her. Unaware of the time surrounding her.

The windows of the seminary were smashed in places and filmed over with dust and brown dirt in others, a hazard of being in the state in the winters. The windows to Parker's mom's house had the same problem; Dirt covered the house and, with no one inside willing to clean them, dirt swelled on the glass. Parker's mom used to stand at their kitchen sink, a yellow sponge limp and wet in her hands, circling the same dish, staring through the dirty kitchen window, unable to see anything outside.

Parker pictured the windows of the seminary putting themselves back together, the glass flying into the air, and clicking together like a puzzle. The green vines retracted into the ground. The grass sprouted from dry yellow to glimmering green. She imagined a priest walking through the yard, holding a shovel in his hand. He walked under the trees standing stock still, even in the wind, their trunks barren of pinecones.

A drop of rain plopped onto Parker's face. The priest, the grass, the windows, disappeared. Parker didn't know what time it was. Late, guessing from the setting of the clouds. She didn't know how long she had been staring at the seminary.

Parker turned from it, sliding her hands into her pockets to feel for something solid. She grabbed onto her keys, jangling in her pocket.

Across the street, a girl stared at her from a porch. She couldn't have been older than six, and was so small. Smaller than a normal child, doll-like. Her hair tangled in her face. There was no one else around. Parker stepped into chalk on the sidewalk, wet, being erased with each drop of rain.

Uneasily, Parker glanced around for a parent, her footsteps slowing until her and the child were standing on opposite sides of the street, locked in a gaze. The little girl's hands stayed firmly by her sides in tight fists, but her face began twitching, as if holding in a laugh. Her mouth twitched hard before opening up into a smile, her eyes unblinking, one of her front teeth missing.

Parker swallowed hard. The air fogged around her.

A bark.

Parker gasped, clutched her keys hard enough to cut into her hand and leave marks. A massive dog stood, unwavering in front of her. So close, that as it barked again Parker watched its spit land on her pants. Its coat was a yellowed golden, slicked back, but its face and paws were so covered in mud they were almost black. The dog's eyes gleamed from underneath the mud as it snarled at Parker again.

Parker lifted her hands in front of her, afraid to run. The threadbare collar around its neck was a faded, bleached red, without a tag. Parker took a step back, the dog pressed forward. Its barking became frantic. Parker froze.

Parker turned her head a fraction of an inch to look at the kid, but she had disappeared from in front of the house.

When she turned back, the dog's tail whipped around a car parked on the other side of the street. Parker took a deep breath. The dog's head came back around the corner, beckoning her to follow it. Afraid it would come back close to her, she walked toward it, despite the shaking in her legs. When she got around the car, there was no dog in sight, only the empty fog of the street.

The wind started to blow. In the distance, a few houses down, wind chimes clanged together, chattering into the fog.

## Chapter 14: Mitchie, 1978

The screaming wouldn't stop. Michelle rolled in her bed, her face plastered against the cold wall, deep in the pits of her brain, where no one could see or hear or excavate, the baby would shut up, no matter the means.

She knew this was a terrible thought to have, yet her brain circled the idea, around and around, up and down, and in and out, darting like a moth to a lamp, its furried antennae twitching with each bump against the bright light.

Rex was at work. Otherwise he would get up and comfort the baby, as he had been every single night, before waking to go to work, under the impression that while he was gone, Mitchie was cradling the baby to her chest, wiping away its tears, bobbling it around the house in circles, the way ants walk in a line. Instead Mitchie avoided the baby, she let it cry.

No one had told her it would be like this.

She thought about calling Carol, but the thought of raising herself from bed shut her down completely. How would Carol even hear her over the screaming?

Mitchie rolled over so she was no longer facing the wall, a step in the right direction. Soon the baby would stop crying, that's what Carol said. You just had to wait the baby out, be stronger than the baby. You couldn't feel bad for the baby and give it what it wanted. Rex said that was child abuse, but Mitchie couldn't take it anymore. She wanted to sleep, and with every wail the child let out, the more grotesque the baby seemed.

The delivery had happened over the course of 14 hours and finally the baby was born at 4:11 AM. Mitchie had been radically changed trying to get the baby out of her body, to dislodge it from her ribcage and shove it out in the world so it could stop leeching from her. But now it still would not let go. It was constantly wanting, crying for food, crying for sleep, crying because

it went to the bathroom, because it wanted to move, because Rex hit its head on something, crying to cry. Mitchie couldn't take it anymore.

Finally the crying stopped and for one moment, the house stilled, quiet, waiting.

Mitchie rose, the thought of Rex coming home to find a smothered baby invaded her mind.

She walked down the hall into the baby's room and quietly as she could, stepped up to the crib.

The baby, Parker, had fallen asleep, finally, her cheeks bright and wet and red. Her small hand grasped tightly to a blanket, her mouth open, and her breath coming out hot and heavy.

Mitchie did not touch her head, she did not wipe a finger over her soft skin. Instead she stared at the small child, wondering if her life was ever going to go back to how it was before she knew what she knew now.

## Chapter 15: Bernie, 1954

The inside of the cabin crawled, alive. Pouring out the doors and shuffling around the room, people laughed, sipped, poised ready for their turn to talk. The fire next to them crackled, like a snake backed into a corner.

Bernie sat on the couch in front of the fire, curled into Brody “Gun” Foundry. Gun was nicknamed after his basketball career, an All-American. He was the best defensive player WSU had ever seen. In the last year he had broken three different records. Bernie met him while he was at Steamline Park practicing. A few girls from Seattle had invited her to spend the 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend in Eastern Washington. They arrived there, walked around, admired the ducks, then got dinner at a nice Italian restaurant. When they came out, it was dark and Gun was still shooting hoops, meticulously. He wasn’t like most men Bernie met. He was quiet, more a listener than a talker, especially in groups. He sat with his hands clasped around a cup, either daydreaming in his own head or listening intently, Bernie couldn’t tell.

She swallowed her bourbon. The liquor ran thick and hurt her stomach. The cabin sat close enough to the road that Bernie could hear and see every car pass. A yellow headlight, a soft purr, silence. She picked at a loose thread on the couch, her knees tucked into her chest, Gun’s arm swung around her.

“Gordy you miss more than half of the shots you take, don’t get me started,” Fierro, an exchange student who had the longest legs Bernie had ever seen, said.

“Oh, Screw you!” Gordy, chubbier bright red cheeks with a comb-across haircut yelled, sloshing his drink around in his cup.

Bernie took the drink out of Gun’s hand, staring into his eyes as she pulled it from him. He nodded and gave her a lopsided smile.

“Did you hear about Carol?” Bernie heard out of the corner behind her where the drinks were being stored. She whipped her head over the couch to see two caked-on make-up hussies. One fingering the rim of a bottle of vodka. The other leaned against the counter with her butt hanging on top of the rim. Bernie got up quickly, downing the rest of the bourbon, shoving the glass back into Gun’s hands.

“I hear she didn’t get the job.”

“I hear she didn’t get the job because she married a-”

“Ew, Germsville,” Bernie said loudly enough for a few people to turn their heads curiously. “You should not be touching that with your fingers.”

The woman withdrew her hand from the bottle quickly, grabbing onto the bar. The other sat up straight, scooting off the surface of the bar.

“Sorry.”

Bernie flashed her a grin leaning in close. “Can’t be any dirtier than your mouth. Excuse me.” Bernie walked around them, grabbing onto the bourbon bottle on the top shelf of the bar.

The finger-er stared at her, mouth hanging open. She could stare all she wanted. Bernie wasn’t going anywhere.

“What’s your bag?” the woman asked quietly, like an angry bird.

“Don’t let me catch you talking about Carol again.” Bernie stared her dead in the eye and tried to seem hard as stone.

The woman backed up in shame, shifting closer to her friend.

Carol had fallen on some challenging times. She met a man, of course that was the reason, who Bernie hated from their first meeting. He worked as a car salesman and talked in the same way, like he was trying to sell himself, accentuating every sentence with exaggerated eye

pops and fake laughs. He talked through his teeth at women instead of to them. He showered Carol with compliments, intimately, in front of people. Carol had never felt the spotlight hitting her face. The attention blinded her from the fact that he was a slimeball, even though Bernie tried to tell her. He started going missing on the weekends and when Carol brought it up to him, he would tell her she was paranoid. It made her a little crazy. Bernie told her she needed to get a job, maybe go into sewing since she did it so much, but Carol couldn't get a job being married to Dean. Dean sold cars imported from New York, cars that didn't have a paper trail.

Outside the wind whistled, and the Christmas lights strung over the pine trees in the distance flew from the tree, dangling like a flag in the air. Everyone was excited for the holiday, but Bernie thought it melodramatic. Even when her parents were alive, the holidays were a small moment in the year. They got presents, Bernie's mom sitting next to the tree, her legs curled underneath her, watching each finger pull at the wrapping paper, her Dad standing over them, passing out presents, and letting out a deep breath once it was over. It was quiet and comfortable.

Bernie left the bar to stand by the window, looking out over the white expanse of the woods. The snow left tiny frost flakes on the windows.. The trees sagged under the weight of gathered snow. She suddenly had the urge to go out, let her boots sink into the slush and walk through the woods, letting the wind wrap around her shoulders, let herself alone for once.

"Bernie, come sit." Gun held out a hand like an offering.

Bernie plopped into the seat.

"You are swaying," he stated.

She nodded at him and leaned back into his arm, sipping her drink.

The fire burned brighter, licking at the top of the fireplace. The wind howled. Around Bernie everyone was settling, trying to get closer to the fire, wrapping themselves in blankets.

The party congregated around, hive like, hovering and discussing before planting themselves delicately on couches and the floor. Their eyes glazed, sparking with every flick of the fire. Across from Bernie, a boy with a long hard nose and feminine, girlish eyelashes rubbed his hand up and down the carpet. He licked his lips, and she mirrored him.

In the corner, two girls were whispering, sneaking glances at Bernie as if she could not see them or hear them. The room was not loud, and she heard the word “problems” pass from one mouth to the other’s ear. Bernie’s chest panged.

The fire was hot against her legs, but cozy over her chest. The glow pulled her in. The fire poured itself over the wood, the coals falling slowly off like bread crumbs. A loud whistle sounded into the air. There was something outside.

“Did you hear that?” Bernie asked the room without pulling her eyes from the flame.

Gun said something over her head, and she could tell her voice grew small, but she couldn’t find the breath to raise it so he could hear. Bernie leaned further into him, and she felt the weight of the cabin’s parts working together like a machine: the laughter, the fire, shifting bodies, sipping drinks, wind blowing against the window.

Her mom used to work bread dough with careful hands, lifting Bernie onto the counter while she cooked, and the movement of the kitchen worked in the same way: the kneading, the crackle of oil, the drying tomatoes on the window sill. The motions rose up in Bernie as a folded over place, in which all of the different elements became one live whole being.

When her father came into the kitchen, her mother transformed. She became a loose screw in the machine, growing smaller, mouse like. Skittering along walls, her eyes wide and sunken into her face. Bernie would reach for her hand and it would fly away like she was trying to grab her. Bernie needed someone to hold her up. She was so small.

The fire swirled; Bernie came back to the room.

“Bernie?” Gun shook her once, hard.

Bernie took in a frantic breath. No one was looking at her.

“You alright? You’re shaking.” Gun rubbed her arm up and down.

“Hm.” She nodded and sunk back into the couch, closer to his arm. He smelled like fall-leaved November.

Bernie was liquid, except for the part where he was touching her. His arm held onto her and made Bernie solid. She wanted it all. She wanted him to coat her entire body. To grab onto her hand.

## Chapter 16: Robbie, 1933

Leo's hand rested on the small of Robbie's back as they walked into the community center. Robbie, wearing her nicest dress, still felt underdressed. There was a hole in the front, down by her knees. The dress was a light red, a present from her mother from her wedding. Leo's eyes had devoured her the second she stepped out of the bathroom. His hands found her waist, his lips found her neck.

Everyone within a fifty mile radius was at the center for the annual community potluck. It had been started years ago by an old couple who lived on the south end of the forest, right on the borderline, after their daughter hadn't come home one year, and then, had not come home the next.

Robbie had seen most, if not all, of these people when Leo took her to the grocery store. Most people looked as uncomfortable as Robbie, tucked into corners holding onto glasses of punch. Some were laughing at a table covered in an ironic amount of pies: sweet potato covered in marshmallows, black bottom with a white meringue, Cherry pies glistening and souped. Dainty sandwiches were in between men's fingers throughout the room. A hot coffee pot boiled in the window to the back kitchen. The smell of bread and meat wafted in from the back room. Robbie held a pan of fresh deer meat casserole many of the men in the room eyed. Meat prices were always on the rise and since Leo was a hunter they were never wanting in their small two person family. Robbie had sacrificed an entire venison for the potluck.

Heat ruminated from the ovens in the kitchen. Leo was already sweating through his coat. His black blazer made his hair look wet with its sleekness. He looked handsome, Robbie was proud to put her arm in his.

“I’m starving.” Leo guided them to a back table. Robbie put the casserole with the pies, the steam still rising from the pan. Within seconds, three men lingered behind her, trying not to look too closely at the casserole, or shove her and Leo out of the way.

“I’m getting into that chocolate pie first.” Leo moved away from her, and Robbie, without something to hold onto, pressed her back to the tablecloth.

“Ma’am.” One of the men wearing a hat tipped the hat toward her. His shoulder brushed hers as he reached across the table to grab a plate.

“Robbie!” John galloped up to her, the wind burn on his cheeks red and angry.

“Johnny boy!” Robbie pulled him into her arms.

“How are you sister?”

“Swell, as I’ve ever been.” Robbie was glad John was there. She hadn’t seen him since the wedding where he had forgotten his shoes and had to race home, barely making it back in time to walk down the aisle.

“Have you seen anyone you know?” John looked around the place. Robbie, unlike herself, huddled herself next to her brother instead of mingling. Unaccustomed to being around so many people anymore. Leo lived out in the woods, separated by acres and acres of land from any other person in town.

“Not yet,” Robbie replied.

“Well, Rich is right over there.” John pointed at a burly man, a logger who felled trees and spent the early hours of the morning chopping them to pieces.

Rich smiled at them, missing one of his teeth. He walked over, bumping people on the way.

“If it isn’t Grand Slam Roberta.” Rich leaned over and hugged her tightly. Robbie rubbed her hands up and down his back. “It’s good to see ya.”

“Little Dicky?” Robbie squinted at him, sizing him up by the shoulders.

“Alright, alright, we don’t need to get into all that again.” Rich grabbed her hands. His own were covered in bright red scratches and fresh gray scars.

“It’s good to see you. How’s the old man?”

“Where is Leo?” John asked.

Leo lingered across the room, surrounded by a few of the older women he brought jerky to during Christmas; Women who asked about his mother, which always puts Leo in a bad mood. His mother was old, frail, fragile. She lived alone at the end of a street in town and was half blind. She didn’t come to their wedding, but some weekends Leo and Robbie went to her house for dinner, and they ate boiled potatoes that weren’t seasoned. Leo’s mother was hard of hearing so they mostly sat around the table listening to forks clink.

Leo looked up and immediately made eye contact with Robbie. Robbie waved him over, but he remained put, a look of confusion on his face. His mouth moved, up and down, open, closed.

“Leo!” John sauntered over to his brother in law.

Leo snapped out of whatever trance he was in to hug John. When Leo hugged, it was light, distanced, one hand wrapped around, and his body turned to the side.

“That man of yours sure is lucky,” Rich said.

Robbie’s cheeks reddened; her hands clenched. She laughed, under her breath, forcing it from her body. “How so?”

“Aw come on now, you had to know everyone on the team had a major crush on you.”

Robbie did, in fact, realize this, but it seemed so long ago now, although it had only been a few years. She remembered the way the team would linger by her to walk her home after a game, the way Rich would pick her bag up for her, or Dirk would pull at her ear when she wasn't paying attention. But all of that ended when Leo came into her life. There wasn't much banter anymore, no more lingering, no more silliness that came with her interactions with men. She thought their affection for her had diminished in some way.

"Should have grabbed me while you had the chance," Robbie teased, unpracticed and awkward.

"Robbie." Leo's strong handed voice came from across the room.

Leo motioned for her to come to him, and since he motioned, she went. Rich followed her.

"John here was just mentioning that we used to play ball with Rich?" Leo had a plate of food in one hand. Leo's hair fell into his face and he blew it up.

"Leo, you don't ever remember anyone," John said.

"How could you forget your pitcher, Leo?" Rich asked.

Leo avoided his eyes, staring across the room at a bookshelf where people donated reading material for the community. All the books were worn, dusty.

"I didn't play with ya'll as long."

"Hell, none of us were any good anyways," Robbie said smiling.

"Don't be crass," Leo said, serious as a stone.

"Yeah, it's unladylike," John laughed.

But Leo did not let the tension fade. Instead, he stared at her. Robbie nodded her head.

“Sorry, Honey, just a slip,” Robbie said, moving over to him so he could put his arm around her. He didn’t move.

They ate, surrounded by strangers buzzing around, swallowing, spitting food from their mouths and laughing loudly. Leo got tired after an hour and got up to leave. Robbie said goodbye to John, but ignored Rich’s glance, getting her coat, and following Leo out the door.

She could tell something was off all the way to the car. Leo was unusually quiet. He walked with a stiff back, he didn’t smile, he didn’t touch her.

When she sat in the car, he turned to her.

“What the hell was that?”

Robbie didn’t know what he was talking about, although the image of Rich’s gap toothed smile popped into her head.

“What do you mean?”

“Rich?” Leo batted his eyelashes flirtatiously, moon eyed, mocking her.

“Rich is an old friend.” Robbie let out a small laugh. “You know him.”

“Do I?” Leo gripped the steering wheel tightly.

“What is this?” Robbie grew irritated. She hadn’t done a thing.

Leo grew silent, his face morphing again, and Robbie was reminded of a child.

“Are you jealous?” Robbie laughed again. Her heart fluttered. While it was annoying, for a moment it was nice to be wanted in such a way by her husband. She felt protected, and if she was being honest with herself, she liked that he seemed threatened, that he could see others wanted her.

“Don’t laugh at me.”

Robbie touched his arm, rubbing it with her thumb. “I’m not, I’m not. You have nothing to worry about, handsome man.”

Leo deflated temporarily. The anger exited the vehicle. He put his hand over the top of hers.

“I better not.”

He pulled her hand off his arm and started the car.

## Chapter 17: Parker, 2006

As Parker climbed the stairs of her mother's house once more, she drifted in and out of blurred lines of vision. Parker moved, but the house stayed the same around her. Annie blipped from one space to another. The energy had been drained from Parker's head and she couldn't think. After the dream, time passed dissonantly. Interactions with Annie were bland and distant. Parker had not slept, and she could not focus on what was right in front of her.

"Park," Annie's voice floated into focus.

"Hm?"

"Where are you?" Her hand swept in front of Parker's face. She stopped on the stairs, looking down on Parker from the top step.

"I feel so out of it," Parker replied, rubbing her eyebrow.

"I can tell." Annie wiped a hand across her cheek. "I've asked you where we are going for lunch like six times."

Parker grabbed her hand and stepped up.

"Usually at the mention of food you perk right up." Annie laughed awkwardly, trying to gauge Parker's reaction.

"I had such a bad dream." Parker moved through her mother's doorway, avoiding the table in the corner.

"I know. We talked about it when it happened, remember?" Annie's footsteps followed, sounding closer than her voice.

Cautiously, Parker slipped onto the floor. She wanted to tell Annie about the therapist, about the dog and the little girl, and about how nothing was moving the way it was supposed to, but she couldn't. She thought of the way her dad and her used to talk about her own mother,

exchanging meaningful glances behind her back. Parker couldn't stand it if Annie gave her that same look. They didn't keep things from each other. Parker told her about her yeast infections and how she was really into Scooby Doo way after an acceptable age. Parker couldn't force the words from her mouth. She wouldn't watch Annie see her differently.

"I can't get his hands from around my throat." Parker wrapped her hands around her own throat, exactly where his had been, the ghost of him there.

"Remember when I had that dream about Perry killing me, and I couldn't look at her for a week? It will fade Parker."

That was the other thing. Parker couldn't convey the complexity of it to her. It wasn't just the hands around her throat. It was his eyes. She recognized his face, but couldn't put a finger on it. The recognition wasn't all her own. He knew who she was.

"I felt like I knew him or something," Parker said, pulling a box from the floor and opening it, a box full of pictures, framed and loose.

"You probably did." Annie pulled a separate box out. She sat on her knee, her legs dangling over one another, like a baby horse.

Parker fingered through the pictures without actually looking at them. "But I don't remember him."

"Well, you would have had to at least seen him at some point. Because your mind can't make up faces."

"Oh, you know that, do you, doctor?" Parker said with an edge to her voice.

Annie watched her carefully, and it made Parker all the more irritable.

"I read it in a journal once," Annie said.

"What journal?"

“Cosmopolitan,” she said flippantly. She rummaged through her box.

A smile edged its way onto Parker’s mouth. Annie mirrored it, and handed her a pile of pictures.

Parker took them, her head cleared a little. There were pictures of Parker when she was young, pictures of her mom and dad getting married. Her mom seemed so different in the pictures. For as long as Parker could remember she was this scrawny thing, jumping at small noises, no meat to her bones. In these pictures, her hair flamed wildly, uncombed and curly, wrapping around her face. Her cheeks were full and baby-like. Parker’s dad looked the same as he did now, same tiny little grin, same rough hair and wide shoulders. If he didn’t have wrinkles around his eyes, he wouldn’t have changed at all. In the picture, he looked at the camera, and her mom looked at him.

“She looks so happy,” Parker said, handing Annie the picture.

Annie licked her lips. “Age does that to people. Don’t worry my love soon you will be just as miserable.”

Parker’s heartbeat erratically. She didn’t want to be miserable; she didn’t want to be like her mom. Parker was seeing things. And they felt so *real*. She didn’t want to lose it. Parker thought of her mom as pathetic, always clinging onto things and people, refusing to get help or try. But now...Parker got the sense that the desperate grasping after Parker and her dad was what grounded her mom, keeping her here with them. Parker pocketed the picture.

In the next picture, a little girl held onto the leg of Parker’s Grandpa Sam, in front of a small Christmas tree. His body was long and lanky, hanging loose, with a hand on her shoulder. While there was no smile on his face, he looked happy. Warm light filled eyes.

Parker flipped through a few more, getting to the black and white photos. Most of them were of a woman with sad eyes. She was smiling in most of the pictures. She had shoulder length hair and long eyelashes. She was pretty, Marilyn Monroe style, but her eyes hung low.

Parker handed the picture off, and grabbed the next, and there he was. “Holy shit, dude.”

“Don’t call me dude.”

“This is the guy!” Parker showed Annie the picture.

His face was not as menacing, but his skeleton chin was impossible to miss. He was awkward in the photo, lanky, dressed in a suit that didn’t reach the ends of his arms, and trying to smile, although it didn’t really look like he knew what he was doing.. He posed stiffly, his arm around the sad woman who wore a dress, but obviously hated it. Her hand pulled down at the end of it. She smiled big and cheesy.

“Who’s the babe?” Annie handed the photo back.

Parker shrugged. In this picture, the woman flew free, her smile genuine. She was pretty, short flapper hair and large child-like eyes. Round cheeks and cute dimples complimented her tiny ears, poking out from her head, radiating happiness, contrasting with all of the other pictures of her.

“No idea.” Parker couldn’t see this man smiling the way her dream man did. Horrific, deep, and hungry. This version of her man was uncomfortable.

“I found your mom’s old diary!” Annie shouted, which for Annie, whose voice was already quiet, was just a regular inside voice, adorned with a bit of excitement.

“Give me that, you lech.” Parker took it from her.

“What if there’s sexy stuff in there?” Annie asked.

Parker groaned. “You’re so gross.”

The leather book was soft, older, and cracked. On the inside cover *Michelle Fields* was written in her small, scrawly cursive. Her mom probably never hid this journal because she was the only one who could read it well, the cursive was messy. Parker flipped through the pages, the writing started neat, went big and angry, then small and gentle, weakly put on the page as if she didn't have the strength to press down with her pen. Parker opened it to a page that was bold and shaky.

*It started so normal. We were in the kitchen and Rex touched my shoulder gently, like he used to do in his old apartment on 18th. I could feel his strong fingers tracing their way down my arm, and for a minute I thought maybe he was gone. He was gone and I could be me again. Parker was gone, having a sleepover at her Carol's house. Where she should be. I don't want her here anymore. I can feel him near her, lingering like a vampire. So Rex covered me and I closed my eyes. For a minute, just a minute, I was there. And then I wasn't and I opened them and he was over me. Hovering over me with his wolf grin and I screamed. I had almost had it, for a moment. And again, he was there. I went for his eyes, scratching them down with my fingers. Screaming with my eyes closed and when I felt the pressure off my body, I looked over the edge of the bed, and Rex was clutching at his face. I couldn't believe what I had done. This is the last time. The hope is unendurable. I can't do it anymore.*

Parker shut the book, her throat cinching in and out. Annie patterned around the room. Parker's eyes followed her baby bump. Parker pulled out the picture she had pocketed, folded it into the pages of the journal. Deciding, her story would not be the same as her mom's. She would get the help she needs.

## Chapter 18: Mitchie, 1983

Mitchie wasn't doing alright. She couldn't get out of bed. Parker was almost five, five years old, and Mitchie hardly knew her. She'd hardly seen her grow up. Mitchie couldn't remember the last time Parker touched her.

Mitchie walked around the house and the walls slipped in and out of her vision. She didn't know what the ghost was doing or how he was doing it. Since he stood over Parker's crib, Mitchie felt him. Not physically, that would be too obvious to ignore. Mitchie lived her life normally, the days looped on and on, and most days, she was there, inside of her current moment. Then, she'd get up to use the bathroom at night and the lights would dim, and she'd hear him humming his song.

The last four years reminded her of when she was living for a short period in her Uncle Sam's house. Sam kept her upstairs in the attic of the cabin because there was only one bedroom. The attic creaked and the pipes whistled at night. The animals in the forest hummed and chirped, and Mitchie was all alone up there, in the dark, aware of the outside, yet imprisoned from it.

But Sam was there with her. He couldn't stand up in the attic so he would climb to the top of the stairs and stick his head in, resting his arms over the side. He read Mitchie bedtime stories until she fell asleep. She dreamed of monsters coming up the attic stairs or people gathering outside her window with torches, screaming at Sam about kidnapping her and lighting the house on fire.

Mitchie walked down the hall and started to count. Five things she saw: A dust ball in the corner, the picture of Rex sitting in the bean bag at his old place, holding his guitar—wait, a picture was not an object—, a picture, a frame, a small rainbow rubber ball, floorboards. The floorboards squeaked as she turned the corner down the stairs. It was hollow in that house.

Mitchie placed her hand against the wall to balance herself. She could not breathe on the stairs. She imagined tumbling down them and twisting herself up into a pretzel. She imagined herself in a wheelchair, unable to move or close her eyes.

Four things Mitchie felt: a panic in her chest. No—she felt the slats in the wall. She felt the tips of her toes pressed into the top of her flats, the air coursing into her lungs, the bottom of her foot dragging on the last step.

Parker and Rex mingled in the living room. Rex was chatting on the phone with Andy, making plans to go out.

“I don’t know if I should leave Parker alone. Michelle’s having a rough time right now.”

“Dad, can I have a snack?”

Mitchie heard Parker, she heard Rex, she heard the wind chimes out front.

Mitchie walked out into the living room and Rex turned from her, quickly hanging up the phone. He placed the receiver back on the coffee table.

“Honey, you’re awake.” Rex moved toward her carefully. Mitchie scared him.

“Mama.” Parker reached for her, and Mitchie put her hand on her head the way Sam used to do to her.

Parker wrapped her sticky hands around Mitchie’s leg. She smelled like the playdoh crammed into the floorboards in the dining room, purple and green.

Rex kissed the side of Mitchie’s head. He smelled like smoke.

“How are you feeling?” Rex moved his hand over Mitchie’s on Parker’s head, and pressed down. Mitchie’s hand was small, weightless, non-existent underneath his.

“Better,” she lied.

“Good to hear.” Rex removed his hand and Mitchie flexed her fingers. He sauntered into the kitchen, Parker hot on his heels. Mitchie followed them like a phantom, or like the eyes of a portrait, hung on the wall.

“What do you want, Parker?” Rex asked her, lifting her onto the island in the middle of the kitchen. The kitchen was antique, the windows stained with paint, and dirt from the flowerpots. The washed-out wood floor reminded Mitchie of sand. She rubbed the bottom of her foot against it.

“I want a Nutter Fluffer.” Parker swung her feet back and forth. Her shoes were tiny enough to fit in Mitchie’s hand.

“The best.” Rex high-fived Parker.

“Mom hates Nutter Fluffers.” Parker smiled over at Mitchie, and the little dimple on her chin indented. Rex smiled at Mitchie over her head, calculated and timed.

The sun peered through the small center of the glass window over the sink, painting the room in a soft glow. Parker floated in it. Mitchie wished she could float in it. She wished she could push her daughter out of it, and sit in it, just for a moment.

“Disgusting,” Mitchie joked.

“Oh, come on, who doesn’t like peanut butter?” Rex pulled out two jars from the cabinets.

“It’s not the peanut butter, it’s the mix.” Mitchie touched Parker’s knee. She wanted her to reach back.

“We all have our weaknesses.” Rex spooned out the peanut butter in a big glob and set the dirty spoon on the counter. “Ours is marshmallow-y goodness.”

“I have too many to count.” Mitchie heard how pathetic it sounded. It vibrated in her ear. Rex laughed back, off-kilter. Parker moved toward him, away from Mitchie.

An idea clicked. An idea large enough to pull Mitchie from herself, back into the kitchen where they all stood. Bowled over by it, Mitchie forgot what she was doing.

If Mitchie had a weakness, maybe her ghost did, too. Maybe he was just a ghost. If he was a ghost, he had been a man once; a man with flaws, a man that could be stopped.

Mitchie’s mother saw him too, she knew it. She felt it, deep in her skin. She knew it from the way her mother’s eyes glazed over the lake, watching for someone. So, what if Mitchie wasn’t the first? She wanted to sink to her knees at the thought. A spiral was building, growing a shelled layer around Mitchie. The ghost couldn’t be untouchable.

Mitchie held in her excitement, like a balloon brimming with air.

Mitchie ran up the stairs, tripping over her own feet. The house was guarded by old memories, trinkets, antiques, and relics from generations behind Mitchie. Maybe some of it was his. Maybe he lived in the house. Maybe that's why they were connected.

Mitchie started in her own room, pulling drawers out of their sockets and strewing her clothes over the bed. The house creaked like it was watching her. Her mother’s jewelry box rested at the bottom of her sock drawer, sleek and black, long enough to need to be put into the dresser sideways.

Mitchie set the box on the bed and slipped the miniature drawers out. The box had a windowed “showing” section that rotated to show off necklaces, hung like drapery. Underneath two miniature drawers held her mother’s rings, gold pins, and earrings. Mitchie examined each closely, hoping to find something indicative of a man. Instead, all of the jewelry was her mother’s. The necklaces that used to frame her collarbones hung on small hooks, the rings that

squeezed her fingers laid flat on the bottom of the felt drawer. A pin from the war her mother stole from Aunt Carol hid beneath bulbous pearl earrings.

She pictured the way her mom adorned the earrings and smiled at Sam, like she was finally arriving home from a long journey. Like Odysseus when he landed on the shores of Ithaca. She imagined her mother turning to her, her face distorting into *his*, becoming ghoulish, sneering, sharp, and sinister. Her mother's eyes disappeared, and all that was left was his smile.

Mitchie left the jewelry box on the bed and went to her closet.

Her mother's body pressed into all the older items. Mitchie moved the clothes into her closet years ago, in hopes that someday she could wear the dresses and feel closer to her mother. The first time she tried on a light blue polka dot dress, Rex asked her if she was dressed up as someone else.

She'd dug through her mother's old clothes enough times that she knew she wouldn't find anything.

Mitchie went back downstairs, slowly, so Rex wouldn't inquire about what she was doing.

He was still in the kitchen. The two of them were like a movie scene without her. Laughing, together in the kitchen. He glanced at Mitchie. She avoided his eyes.

The door to the basement at the end of the hall was closed off with a glass doorknob. The stairs were splattered white paint.

The only person who went into the basement regularly was Rex, to get tools to fix things, which he hadn't done in a long time. When Mitchie still worked at the city building as a receptionist, he fixed everything: the lawn, the dirt on the windows, the chairs that got wobbly in the kitchen. After she quit to stay home for Parker, Rex started working for a construction

company and things stopped getting fixed. Mitchie felt useless looking at everything broken in the house.

With the help of mining lanterns Rex hung up, it was easy to see the cobwebs hanging from the walls. Mitchie flicked the lights on as she made her way down. Boxes were stacked two or three high across the cement floor. A red door in one back corner was painted shut and impossible to open. Three broken dog kennels were stacked in a corner next to the door, their metal grate doors hung outwards. No one Mitchie knew ever had a dog, but she'd inherited the kennels and had forgotten they were in the basement.

Mitchie stepped in and out of the light. The cement floor was colder than upstairs. Her bare feet picked up dirt, rocks stabbing her skin on the way.

The boxes were in good condition. She pulled the first one up from the floor and it glided through the air, mostly filled with papers. She set it next to her feet. Inside the next were toys, maybe Parker's, maybe her own. Parker's baby stuff gradually sunk into the house. Mitchie couldn't remember throwing it out.

She sifted through, picking up an old teddy bear without eyes, a small journal without anything written in it, picture books, figurines from McDonald's, and missing pieces from board games.

She wished she knew what she was looking for— a remnant, a thread of him lying around, anything Mitchie could use to cut his strings to the house. Maybe if she destroyed the objects that connected him to the house, he wouldn't be able to visit earth anymore. The thought of burning down the entire house from the basement up crossed her mind, igniting the boxes in a pile of gasoline.

The next box was far dustier, buried at the bottom of the box pile. The cardboard of the box was wet, mold spread across the sides.

“Mitch?” Rex called down the stairs, and the image of him shutting her down in the basement flashed through Mitchie’s brain.

“Yes?” she called back.

“What’re you doing down here?” Rex climbed down the stairs.

“Looking through some old things. There’s just so many boxes here. I thought I might clean some of this stuff out.” Her hands laid in the dusty box, holding onto a picture frame with no picture.

“You? Cleaning up? What is happening in my house?” Rex turned the corner.

Mitchie didn’t laugh. “I clean all the time. I wash the dishes every night. When was the last time—”

“Easy, Muhammed Ali, I was joking.” Rex raised his hands up apologetically. His eyebrows lifted in annoyance.

“You’re not funny,” she replied.

He stood over her. His hands rested on his hips.

“Do you need something?” she asked.

Recently he had gained weight. The small belly protruded from his belt buckle wiggled when he stepped forward. He was self-conscious of it, but Mitchie liked it. It reminded her he has his own faults.

“You want some help?” he asked, hopeful.

“Where’s Parker?”

“She’s with Carol, remember? They’re baking cookies or something.” He sat on a box.

Mitchie hadn't heard her leave.

"Okay," she said because she was happy not to be alone. Recently she was always alone, waiting for the ghost to appear, waiting for someone to walk into the house, waiting for shadows to shift.

He dragged the first box close to him. When he was finished, Mitchie would look through it again.

"Whose stuff is this?" he asked. He hauled out stacks of yellowing paper.

"Some of it is my mom's. Some of it I have no idea. It seems too old to be hers."

His eyebrows raised at the mention of Mitchie's mom, but he didn't give it any more attention than that. "Maybe she hid hundreds of dollars in one of these."

"Maybe we'll be rich, and we can move into a mansion." Mitchie grinned. Playing the 'what if we got rich' game was something they had been doing since they got married. They would buy a boat, send Parker to college, pay off the cars, and move to Italy. They would re-furnish the house, buy all the instruments in the world, buy a whole movie theater.

He smiled warmly back. "Have you never gone through all this stuff before, when you were little?"

Mitchie shook her head. "Maybe some of it? It's hard to remember." Mitchie's memory was funny. She remembered the horrible things, the awful terrible events that happened to her with a clarity that played in her head like a wind-up music box. But other things were distorted and blurry. She didn't remember her own childhood, going to school, making friends. Instead, she contained blips, short, sparse moments, drowned by the bad memories.

She continued, "Carol always tried to protect me from things about my mom. She used to say people thought my mom was a bad person, but that she was the best person. They didn't

know her. I think all of Carol's protection erased her. It makes me feel like I didn't even know her because the mom I remember was cold and careless, and didn't give a damn about me. I forgot she used to keep things in the basement."

"This is the most I've heard you talk about your mom." Rex held a paper plate drawn into a bunny mask over his face.

Mitchie shrugged.

Underneath the picture frame was more paper. Some newspaper clippings, awards her mother won when she was in school. Mitchie sifted through until she landed on two obituaries.

"Holy shit," she said, growing clammy. Her stomach lit up. She wiped the sweat from her forehead.

"What?" Rex looked, but didn't move closer to her.

The first obituary was Robbie Fields, 27, mother of Bernadette Fields. She was young in the picture, chunkier than Mitchie's own mother, with large cheeks and hair pinned up out of her face. In all the other pictures Mitchie had seen of her, her hair covered her face, hanging low in her eyes. In the clipping, a small smirk adorned her lips.

The second obituary was him.

"This is—" Mitchie started and stopped.

Rex looked more and more concerned. "What?"

The disappointment drew down on his face. They were finally having a regular moment, and she ruined it. She hid the paper behind the box. He wouldn't understand.

She hesitated. At the same time, maybe this would make him believe her. She wasn't just seeing things. She wasn't crazy. She saw something real, substantial, sitting in her hands. She

could be normal, and they could stop him together, or he could finally see him if he just knew what he looked like. Rex could finally see Mitchie again.

“This.” Mitchie held out the obituary. Rex gave her a concerned look and made his way to the floor. His large arm rested just behind Mitchie who leaned into it.

The second obituary read: Leo Fields, 29. He looked different than he did when he appeared to her. Far younger, and without that malicious smile. He stared straight into the camera, his hair slicked back. His long skeleton face appeared more sculpted than skeletal. His eyes weren't as cold. In fact, they appeared angrier, like black pearls in the socket. He was well-kept and standing straight back.

“Your grandfather?” Rex placed his hand over Mitchie's.

“This is him,” she choked.

“Who?” he asked. When Mitchie didn't respond he continued, “like *him*, him?”

She nodded.

Rex studied the picture. He took it from her hands, and put it back in the box.

“Well, there you have it, Hun.” He rubbed her back. “Now we know where you're getting his face from. You must have seen his face in some pictures somewhere or something, and that's why he keeps popping into your head.”

“Maybe,” Mitchie said quietly. A hole opened inside her. He didn't understand.

“We'll take this to Dr. Hader?” He picked the clipping up again.

Mitchie grabbed it from him. “Maybe,” she repeated. She knew she had never seen a picture of him before. Ever. Her mom had never spoken about her dad. Neither had Sam. Neither had Carol. None of them had even mentioned him. It was like he didn't exist. Leo Fields didn't exist until the moment she held his picture.

Something wasn't right, not with Mitchie. She was there, mentally. She was not crazy or hallucinating, because he was real. The visions were not disfigured; they weren't happening randomly. They happened during precise moments when she was alone. Where he could catch her off guard. All of the appearances were purposeful, a form of torture to keep her from positioning herself in time, punishing her for something. Who was he before he was Mitchie's ghost? What kind of horrible things did he do when he was not just a ghost? If she found that out, she could prove it to Rex.

"Could you get me a glass of water?" Mitchie touched his arm and he kissed her head before heading upstairs.

Now that Mitchie knew who he was, what was Leo Fields' weakness? If she couldn't stop this deterioration, if it continued, on and on, who would he go after next? From daughter to daughter, from woman to woman? Mitchie weaved together their stories into a braid, and it snapped at the root. Not anymore. The cycle would end.

## Chapter 19: Bernie, 1955

Bernie chased a large horse fly around the house while Carol washed the dishes. Carol hummed. The night air was cool, a respite from the heat of the day. It had been the hottest summer day yet, and the two girls spent it sitting on the front porch fanning themselves and drinking iced lemonades.

“Give up,” Carol called out.

“Never.” Bernie swatted her towel against the kitchen counter and it cracked out with a loud smack. The fly zoomed past her ear. Its movements were frantic now, how animals zig zagged when they heard a bullet hiss against the ground.

“You are never going to get it,” Carol sang out.

“It’s not my fault that the fly is smarter than I am.”

Carol turned the water off and demanded the towel from Bernie. Bernie handed it over, without letting go. Carol tugged at it playfully before ripping it from Bernie’s hands.

“Feisty.” Bernie wiggled her eyebrows.

“Oh, buzz off.” Carol leaned against the counter.

“Want to go out tonight?” Bernie asked.

Carol shook her head immediately.

Bernie held a hand to her heart. “Carol Summers doesn’t want to go talk to boys?” Bernie acted out being shocked, but she actually was. Carol never said no to boys. Carol rarely even said no to her.

“I’m tired from the heat,” Carol said, looking back into the sink, where there weren’t any more dirty dishes.

Bernie moved around the kitchen to stand close enough to touch Carol. She crossed her arms and leaned against the counter next to the sink. Bernie faced forward, toward the door leading to the living room, an empty room without anything but a fireplace grate that hadn't been used in years.

"You alright there?" Bernie asked.

Carol nodded her head.

"What's going on in that big brain of yours?"

"No thoughts, just emptiness." She bumped her hip to Bernie's.

Bernie didn't bite. "Carol."

"Bernie."

"What's wrong?"

She turned to Bernie with begging eyes. "I think I need to do something for myself."

"Okay?"

"I'm going to enlist as a nurse I think."

Bernie took a step away from her. "Why would you do that?"

"They need us, you know?"

"Those men started their own war, we don't need to go clean up their mess. We can't even vote."

"I just, it's more than all that war. I need this. I need a change," Carol replied.

"Why?" Bernie closed her mouth.

"Bernie, I am useless. I don't have anything. I can't get a job."

"You have me."

“I know that. But I live with Dean now, and it’s lonely. He’s never there. I have nothing to do. I can’t get pregnant. What do I have for me?”

Bernie paused. She thought. She came up short.

“Come on, Carol. Be serious.” Bernie laughed, but it felt more like a cough.

Carol laughed too, a sad laugh, but finally the tension broke.

“Alright, come on.” Carol grabbed Bernie’s hand and led her to the porch. Bernie followed her, watching the way her body was outlined by the hall, the door, the bright open field outside. She trailed Carol, falling behind.

...

Two weeks later, a taxi was running outside the house when Bernie got home. She burst into the front door, desperate to find Carol. It didn’t take long. Carol stood by the fireplace in the living room. In her hand, she held onto a large green bag, filled to the brim with clothes.

A memory flooded Bernie’s mind: a stack of luggage beside her mother’s bare feet, a white suitcase with the tags on it, her own backpack propped up against it.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Bernie asked before Carol looked up. Bernie knew that Carol knew she was there; She’d slammed the door when she walked in.

“Hi, Bernie, I’m well. Thank you for asking.”

“Carol, why is there a taxi outside of our house?”

“Your house, Bernie. I got married.” Carol looked larger than herself in the barren living room. “I’m leaving.”

“Oh, I heard. I ran into Paulie at the store. The war, Carol? You don’t even kill spiders. You still don’t know how to make a cup of coffee for yourself.”

“I guess that’s something I’ll need to learn over there,” Carol replied sarcastically.

Bernie scoffed, “Carol, put your goddamn bag down.”

Carol held the bag strap tighter. “No.”

Bernie blocked the doorway. Carol didn’t try to leave yet. A coldness washed over her.

“I’m not some dyke spinster. That’s what people think of us, Bern.”

Bernie waved her hands in the air. “Who cares what people think, we know we aren’t.”

“I care! I want a husband who loves me! I want love, and bridge nights, and make-up. I want to wake up in the morning and have my kids bring me breakfast in bed. I want it all not to be so hard.”

Bernie stayed silent.

“Bernie, you’ve never wanted anything in your life. I don’t even mean it to be nasty. I mean, you aren’t like me. You’re carefree and bored, and you don’t need anything or anyone. I’m not like that. I am lonely.”

Bernie crossed her arms casually, cruelly. “Carol, I know you just want me to chase you right now. You want me to beg, and I won’t do it.”

Carol put her bag on her shoulder and shouldered past Bernie.

“You’re being a child.” Bernie followed her. “What do you think you’re going to do? Your life isn’t a romance novel. That stuff doesn’t exist!”

Carol shook her head. The taxi driver got out of the cab, popping the trunk open.

“You know what, go right ahead. Go find your man on the beaches of Morocco, or wherever. Forget about Dean, and me, and this entire town! You’re right! None of this matters. Nothing matters Carol, and you’ve always thought all this stupid shit mattered and it doesn’t. You’re going to go to war, to what? Meet someone? The men here are the same men being sent out there.”

Carol didn't take the bait. She waited and waited in front of an open cab door. The cabby took her bag and shoved it in the trunk, getting into the front seat.

"Bernie, come here and tell me you love me. Tell me we are best friends, and that you'll miss me. Tell me you're proud I am doing something without you."

"No." Bernie's voice cracked.

Carol's face fell.

Carol got into the cab. Bernie got a whiff of her perfume she bought from the catalogs a month ago.

"It does matter, Bernie. Something has to matter."

With that, she closed the taxi door and sped off.

## Chapter 20: Robbie, 1934

It was the end of November and John's pumpkins from Halloween were still smiling from the porch. Their skin shriveled, drooping into their mouths from decay. Underneath Robbie's coat, she felt similarly.

The baby kicked hard. Robbie could've sworn it meant to break out. She rubbed circles over her stomach, soothing them both as she walked up the steps. Her feet slid over the concrete porch, icy from the cold outside. She clutched the handrail tightly.

John's white, thin curtains were open. Inside, brown candles lined the wall across from the window. Each one was lit, a tiny flame casting shadows on the wall. All the rooms in his house were bigger than her and Leo's, even though John lived in the same square footage. He lived alone. There was something to be said about people taking up space.

Robbie knocked on the door, making herself small in her jacket. She swore it got colder every winter. John's footsteps cut across the house. He was a shorter man, and to make up for it, he walked quickly wherever he went, with tiny, hurried steps. The sound comforted Robbie. He opened the door with a gentle smile, his thin lips disappearing behind his cheeks.

"Hi, Sis," he said with a hand behind his back while the other motioned Robbie into his house.

John's living room was picturesque. A small fireplace, big enough for a single log, was the centerpiece. Paintings he bought from around the country, and pictures of his time working out at the paper mill were framed on the wall. In the old photos, his scrawny arms looked dainty next to the muscles of the other men. Now, he stood like a fire hydrant over the furniture, the veins lifted from his arms.

"God, it smells good in here," Robbie said, hanging her coat up in the closet by the door.

“I’m making pie from that meat Leo brought me last week.” John sat in one of the large recliners that looked comfortable from a distance, but curved upward toward the top, forcing the seated to hunch forward. Flowers in tall, black vases loomed in the corners, yellow, green, and orange flowers branching out over the room. He lived in a single man’s house, paid off in full.

“How are you?” he said in his calm way, like a trainman’s low whistle.

Robbie took off her hat, knitted by their mother. “Oh, you know.”

John had two cups of tea ready, steaming, sitting in front of the fireplace on a small coffee table. Robbie was being lulled to sleep. John had that effect on her. Ever since they were kids, if John was next to her Robbie knew she had a place. John had the sort of charisma most men strived for, to build businesses or to get women. The reason he existed that way was only due to the fortune of being a good person. He never used his influence to hurt people. Robbie loved that about her brother. She loved that he made eye contact with her when she talked.

“How are you, my love?” Robbie asked him, her voice cracking.

He handed Robbie the cup of tea and gestured to the seat next to him. She pressed the cup into the palm of her hands, leaning over the carpet in case she spilled.

“Oh, you know.” He let out air and shot Robbie a crooked smile.

“Come on,” she smiled.

“Things are good. The mill is good. My house is good. This tea is good.” He took a sip. The crest of his cheeks were bright pink.

“Well, aren’t you just the lucky one?” Robbie sipped the tea.

“Are you not? Loving husband, nice house with a big yard. All you need is a dog.”

Robbie hummed into her cup.

“Uh-oh, trouble in paradise?” John propped forward.

Robbie got dizzy. She set the tea down on the coffee table.

“No,” she chided.

His eyebrows pulled together, and he leaned forward, brushing his hand on her shoulder.

“Hey,” he said. “Talk to me. What’s happening?”

Robbie’s throat closed. She wrapped her hand around his. “Nothing, it’s nothing. Just some of the time, I get the feeling that Leo doesn’t love me.”

Out loud, Robbie winced at the dramatics of it all. The shock in John’s eye surprised her. He knew Leo, but she supposed men treated each other differently. Men bunched together at the potluck while she served drinks with the rest of the wives. Men boldly look each other in the eye when they talk. They search for each other’s eyes, like they’re telling secrets.

John grasped her hand tight. “You know how men are Rob. Why would you ever think that?”

She didn’t smile back. “The other day we got into an argument.”

“Arguments are natural.” He tried to be lighthearted.

Frustration leapt into her throat. “It wasn’t a regular argument. He was accusing me of wanting other men.” Robbie’s cheeks grew hot, but she told herself she would tell him. She would stick with it.

“Oh.” He shifted his pants further down his leg.

“I’m sorry, I know that’s a lot, but who else am I to talk to about it?”

“It’s just...talking about this with another man’s wife...”

“I’m your sister, not another man’s wife.” She wanted to grasp him, but he was shifting away from her. Visibly, he sunk back into his chair. Robbie desperately knocked forward into the table.

“After the potluck he accused me of going with Rich. Since then he keeps asking me the same questions, over and over. He keeps asking me who I’m with when he isn’t home.” Robbie flicked her hands about. Back and forth.

John nodded his head, his Adam’s apple bobbing.

“The other day he called me a whore,” she continued. That hadn’t even been the worst of it. He had grabbed her arms so hard she had finger marks stamped into her skin for days. But saying that would have felt like a betrayal to Leo. Afterwards, he kissed the marks, wrapping his arms around her, wiping tears from her eyes, apologizing, again and again. He begged her not to listen to what he said, that imagining her with someone else made him crazy. He repeated that he had never done anything like that before. He loved her so much. Robbie forgave him the second he kissed her cheek. All she wanted from John was a way to ease Leo’s insecurity.

“Leo said that to you?” John’s voice lowered distinctly.

She nodded.

John settled back into the couch, staring at the wall across from him. “A man shouldn’t say anything like that to a woman. But it was probably him just losing his temper. His dad was like that, too. Out in public, he was a real mousy guy, but in private you could hear him screaming from down the street.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I mean, I still see him around town sometimes. Now he’s old and frail. Always looking over his shoulder, like he’s going to get what’s coming to him.”

“Jeez, I never knew,” Robbie said, thinking about the way Leo avoided any talk of his father. Leo never yelled loudly, he held his anger close to his chest. It hurt him.

“Yeah well,” John paused. “I can’t believe you don’t know any of this, aren’t you married to him?”

“Leo doesn’t talk about his dad.”

“I’m sure if you just remind him you love him, he’ll get over that jealousy. He’s never been in a relationship before you. Let’s go play rummy and forget all this.” John stood, wiping his fingers together like wiping away crumbs.

Robbie followed him into the kitchen. They played for hours until a knock on the door interrupted them.

“I got it.” John rose.

“Are you expecting someone?”

“I am a very charming man. Who knows what visitors may be calling.” He winked.

Robbie followed him into the living room. John opened the door and Leo’s face popped into the house before the door opened all the way. His arm reached out across the door to block John from closing it on him.

“Leo?” John tilted his head.

“Hi there, John.” Leo feigned a small smile. Sweat hung off his lip, like he had run to the house. He licked his lips, locking eyes with Robbie.

“What’re you doing here?” John asked.

“My wife,” Leo said matter-of-factly. He gestured to Robbie with his hand, casual, disinterested, but she knew better. His eyes were skittish, fluttering around without landing. His fingers wrapped around the edge of the door.

“What about her, Leo?” John stood taller. Leo was no match for John. John, despite his height, was burly, large, and muscular. He had been in many fights before. Robbie could never

see Leo in a fight. He was tall and wiry, but avoidant, particularly of men. He saw them as obstacles to getting what he wanted. Leo had scars on his hands from the woods, but they were unmarred from fighting. The only thing intimidating about Leo was the bearing look in his eye. Like he would kill you if you gave him just one opportunity to do it, without hesitation.

“She needs to come home now.” Leo pushed a little harder on the door. A breeze swept its way inside. Robbie’s chest hammered.

“I think she can leave when she wants. What’s the problem?” John responded.

“Open the door, John.” Leo looked him right in the eye.

John looked back at Robbie with those sad brown eyes, and she begged him with her entire body. Her eyes pleaded with him not to open the door.

John hesitated “I’m sorry Rob, I can’t keep a man from his wife.”

John let Leo push the door open more. Leo visibly relaxed, even letting a small smile grace his face. He wiped the sweat from his forehead.

As soon as John stepped away from the door, Leo stood tall, slicking his hair back with his hand. He let out a sharp breath that sounded like a laugh. Robbie froze. Her stomach sprang into her throat.

“Come on.” Leo grinned, opening sideways so she could walk past him.

“You keep your hands to yourself,” John said weakly.

Robbie didn’t take a single step forward.

Leo didn’t answer, he didn’t even look at John. His gaze lay unwavering on Robbie’s face. She couldn’t look away. She couldn’t step forward.

Leo tilted his head. She could tell he was enjoying himself.

John walked over to Robbie.

“Robbie,” John put a hand on her back. Frantically, Robbie pushed back into his hand, but he pushed forward. He continued to push until Robbie was within arm’s length of Leo.

The betrayal was too much. Tears threatened to leak from Robbie’s eyes. Fury and fear ripped through her. She stood up straight so John wasn’t touching her anymore. Leo put a light hand on her arm, his dry fingertips being gentle, for the moment. Robbie was Leo’s and there was not a thing she could do about it, but worse, she felt in sync with him then. They had both known it was inevitable. In this world, she didn’t have friends, she didn’t have anyone but Leo. Leo brushed up closer to her, and Robbie welcomed it. At that moment, Leo was her husband, and John was a coward. Robbie stared John down, his mouth turned downwards in shame.

“Goodbye, John.” Robbie followed Leo out the door.

## Chapter 21: Parker, 2006

The cabin materialized as a version of a house Parker never lived in, but somehow recognized. A breeze wafted in through the window from the lake that rested in the exterior, surrounded by moss-consumed branches. The air stroked Parker's cheek with familiarity. Inside, the floors were dark wood, and Parker's eye tracked skid marks that she could identify inherently. A fireplace in the center of the furthest wall, surrounded by red arm chairs, poised like a theater set of a home. Not Parker's home, but a home lingering, far off in the matrix of her memory. Mounted intimately on the walls, the heads of different animals and weapons: a bear, crossbow, elk, hunting knife, rifle, enclosed the space, with only one opening; A doorway leading to another room was open, revealing a desolate kitchen space, counters bare of utensils and food, lacking the remnants of the living.

The curtains were drawn back from the windows and the glass was covered in a thin fogged ice. The fire crackled inside, but Parker didn't feel warm or cold, just present. She smelled pine.

She sat down in one of the arm chairs and observed the fire. It danced around her eyes. She wanted to feel peaceful, but the room contained little movement. Shadows jumped from the fire in trepidation.

Parker was dreaming again, and this time, she decided to fraternize with the dream. She could play along.

A shadow smoothed against the window in the shape of a woman. The dark tendrils of hair cast out before her shadow disappeared again. Parker's heart sped up. She tried yelling to her, but nothing came out.

Outside, whispers rose, chattering around the cracks of the fire. Yet, Parker couldn't see who was whispering through the aperture. She rose to the window, pressing her breath to the glass. It unfogged before veiling once again. It was too dark to see anything on the other side.

*Today would be the end.*

In the distance, screams burst forth: harsh, abraded, painful.

Suddenly, Parker was yanked so hard that she woke up, but the screaming reverberated in her ear.

"Parker, let go!" Annie yelled.

"What?" Parker was still halfway asleep. Annie's hand clawed at her own. Her fingernails scraped against the thin layer of skin over the top of Parker's hand.

Annie's legs flailed, but she couldn't get up because of her stomach bulge. She cried, her face red. Her mouth opened and closed. Parker's hand rested on her stomach, tense and hard. The hand burned hot. Annie's eyes rolled wild like a horse.

Parker ripped her hand away and rolled off the bed, scrambling across the floor. The sheet was soaked in sweat, a damp stain expanded over the surface. Parker pushed her hair from her face and flinched at the heat radiating from her hand.

"What is happening?"

Annie sobbed on the floor, cradling her stomach.

"Annie?" Parker leaned over the bed. Annie lifted a hand in the air to stop her.

"I believe you now," Annie said.

"What?"

"About the dreams. I believe you now." Annie revealed the skin of her stomach, blistering in the shape of a hand print. Snot dribbled over her mouth.

The hand print swelled with tiny white blisters, bright red.

“Jesus, Annie. What happened?”

Annie sat up, her fingers shaking, hovering over the wound.

“Annie, I’m so sorry.”

Annie shook her head and cried, “What are we going to do?”

## Chapter 22: Mitchie, 1985

Outside the house, it was snowing, a rare occasion for the wet winters of Washington. Washington was always gray, but never too cold. Mitchie loved the weather. She hated snow, and even more, hated slipping down their slanted steps when there was ice. Yet, this year, there was something different about the atmosphere. She felt better, had been sleeping more, eating more, her cheeks were filling back to the way they were before she had gone to college, lingering between being a teenager and an adult. This year, Mitchie didn't mind the snow. She watched it float down from the large windows Rex had installed, so she wouldn't feel so trapped in the house when they first moved in, so many years ago.

Icicles hung from the bottom of Rex's truck, the gutters, the trees. Even tiny icicles, smaller than Mitchie's pinky finger, clung to the window's small ledges. They were everywhere, small signs of danger, impending sharp points. Mitchie could hide from them inside the house, experiencing the danger from a distance.

Rex walked into the living room holding a kennel in his hand.

"That is the smallest puppy I've ever seen. Are you sure it's a hound dog?"

Rex smiled, and unable to cover his mouth, revealed the small gap by his canine. Mitchie smiled at it. Those little intricacies made him the man she married. Recently, Rex was quartered on her side. When she stopped talking about the things she saw, those figures stopped swarming in her head. She had been taking the pills the doctor gave her, and they helped her stay cognizant.

"He's a hound dog? Yeah, right. I think those breeders are crooks or something. This pup shouldn't have been taken from its mom so soon," Rex said.

Inside the crate, the puppy was asleep, pressing its nose through the grate. A white and brown paw stuck out, too big for his head, matching his ears. Mitchie reached out and touched the pad of his paw. His ear twitched.

“Parker’s going to lose her mind.” Rex sat down across from Mitchie on the floor of their living room. The top of the Christmas tree was too long. Rex had squished it into the room, forcing the top to arch across the ceiling.

Mitchie sat in between his legs. He pushed his back into the couch.

“What time is Carol dropping her off?”

“Within the next hour. I think Dean is around, so maybe a bit longer,” Mitchie replied.

Carol moved slower and slower those days. Her frail frame shrunk, pale and sickly. But she refused help, not from Mitchie, or Rex, or Dean; Especially not from Dean.

“Well, it looks like we have the next hour to ourselves then.” Rex wrapped his arms around Mitchie and there was nothing sexual about it. They had done something awesome. Parker would be ecstatic. Mitchie was a good mom. Parker would have to recognize that.

“God dammit, I’m excited.” Rex smiled into Mitchie’s hair.

Mitchie tucked her fingers into his long hair and dragged them through it lightly. “Me too.”

They sat, for a moment, in their peace, waiting for their daughter to come home.

An hour passed. The puppy had not moved except to breathe. The front door creaked open.

“Hello?” Carol’s voice wavered up and down with her old age. Her once blonde hair was now light, even gray. The gray only started to appear in recent years, when she stopped dyeing it. Her old frail hand, squished like burned skin, guided Parker inside.

Parker slowly walked in, her feet dragging across the floor. Her eyes barely open.

“Merry Christmas, Carol,” Rex said.

“Merry Christmas, T-Rex,” Carol kept her hand on Parker’s back, moving her slowly into the living room. Carol mischievously smiled at Mitchie, who tried to return a grin, but hid her face in her hand, unable to contain herself.

“Tired, Park?” Mitchie asked.

Parker shook her head no.

“Well, that’s a good thing, because you can’t be tired at Christmas,” Rex said. He stood, disentangling from Mitchie, who pushed herself up onto the couch to better see her daughter.

“I’m not!” Parker snapped. She rushed forward and turned the corner around the couch, freezing when she saw the kennel underneath the lights of the Christmas tree.

“What is that?” Parker pointed at it, her entire body stiff.

“Why don’t you go check it out?” Rex pushed her forward, but her body did not move. Her face screwed up, and she began to cry.

Rex turned back to Mitchie, whose mouth hung open. Parker was not the type to cry, she was a jump for joy, drop her ice cream on the floor in excitement, kind of kid. Rex mouthed “wow”, and Mitchie shrugged.

“Parker, it’s yours.” Rex rubbed his hand on her back and Parker crumpled to the floor, her head in her hands. Her small tears fell onto the wood floor, pooling there.

“Parker, honey, it’s okay.” Mitchie attempted not to laugh, but it was so unlike Parker, and so sweet, and there was nothing that was going to take the smile from her face. The house was warm, the tree glowed red and green, outside it snowed, and Mitchie wanted to capture this

moment in a snow globe and shake it up every night—with Rex by her side, and Parker in between them.

“A puppppyy,” Parker wailed. She started to crawl across the floor, unable to get herself to stand, Rex hovering over her. Her knee landed in her own tears and smudged them across the floor.

The puppy started to wake, previously dead to the world. Its runny, red-rimmed eyes darted between the people in the room.

“Careful, he’s still really tiny.” Rex opened up the crate for the puppy to come out.

“I wouldn’t hurt him!” Parker yelled through the snot building up on her upper lip.

Rex laughed. “I know that, just be careful.”

“Come here, little guy,” Parker whispered into the cage, wiping the snot from her face with her sleeve.

Carol came up behind Mitchie, placing a hand on her shoulder. Mitchie grabbed onto the hand.

“Jesus,” Carol whispered in her ear.

“Did not expect that reaction,” Mitchie replied.

“Our little Parker is a girl after all. Look at those big emotions.”

“Poor girl doesn’t know what’s coming,” Mitchie whispered and Carol squeezed her.

“Sh. Let’s save that for another day.”

Parker pulled the puppy from the cage. His legs dangled lifelessly while he stared at her. She pulled him gently to her chest, cradling him like a baby instead of an animal.

“What are you going to name him?” Rex asked.

Parker dug her nose into the dog’s fur and began to cry again. “I don’t know.”

“He has to have a name,” Mitchie replied, too loudly for the small room they were in. Parker walked up to her and pressed into Mitchie’s knee. Rex sat back down on the floor.

Mitchie hugged Parker and the dog to her all at once, lifting them into her lap. She wished she could be that small and happy. “How about Peter?”

“No!” Parker ripped her face from the dog in astonishment. The dog licked at her tears.

“You love Peter Pan,” Mitchie said.

“When I was five, I don’t even like that anymore.”

“How about Billy Bob?” Rex said.

“That’s ugly dad!”

“What! Billy Bob is a classic name.” Rex laughed.

“He is not Billy Bob.” Parker patted down the dog’s ears and moved her mouth away from the dog’s tongue, trying to lap up the salt from her cheeks.

“How about Fluffy?” Carol said.

Mitchie cringed. Parker just glared at her.

Mitchie reached over to pet the puppy’s head. Its fur was soft.

“I want to name him Tucker,” Parker said with finality.

Mitchie snickered, “Like the neighbor boy?”

Parker nodded. “To remember him.”

The month before, Parker’s best neighborhood friend Tucker had moved to West Virginia with his family of six. Parker was devastated, watching him drive away from the porch. She spent the next hour hitting a tree with a stick and knocking all of the leaves off, then locking herself away in her room. Mitchie could hear her crying, but didn’t want to be at the mercy of her wrath, so she let her cry. When Rex got home, she ran into his arms.

“Park, you can’t name a dog after your crush.” Rex hid his smile behind his hand.

“He is not a crush!” Parker yelled. She pushed herself up against Mitchie’s chest. Mitchie wrapped her arm around the dog so it wouldn’t fall off the couch.

Rex raised his hands in surrender.

“He was my friend. You’re just stupid and don’t know the difference. I’m going to remember him forever.”

“Watch your mouth, Park,” Rex said firmly. Parker surrendered into Mitchie’s lap and continued petting the dog.

“She’s tired Rex leave her alone,” Carol said.

The dog, still tired from its long journey in Rex’s truck, snuggled into Parker, closing its eyes. Carol took a seat on the rocking chair on the other side of the room. Rex put a hand on Mitchie’s knee. Mitchie could not help but think about how much better she felt. How she didn’t feel the need to stir the air, to unsettle the settled. She was calm, but more than that, content. She did not want anything more than this, she thought for one second, a minute, twenty minutes.

It seemed to Mitchie the good moments were never lasting long enough; They disappeared, and she became fraught, trying to clutch them to her chest. Mitchie would try and remember this moment over and over in her head. She would hold it close to her chest, replay it like a VCR tape until the film ran out, or until it was ingrained in her brain. But every time she replayed it, the scene changed just a little; Parker ran into the house, Carol left out the back door, the puppy barked. The good moments never remained the same, while the bad memories seemed to stagnate, not only in her memory, but in her body. She felt them in her hands, her back, her pelvis, her spine.

Mitchie brushed the hair out of Parker's face, watching the happy tears fall from her face, recognizing that in a few weeks, they would never have been there at all.

## Chapter 23: Bernie, 1955

Bill's partner slid into the chair next to Bernie, sporting a shit-eating grin. He tucked the cigarette that was in his mouth into his front shirt pocket. The other men at the table watched him, lazily. Bernie adjusted closer to the table. The man spread his legs apart. If either moved an inch they would be touching.

"What game are we playing?" he asked in his deep voice, like a saxophone.

The other men at the table looked at one another, then back to him, considering.

"Where's Bill?" Dan asked. Dan invited Bernie out that night, she guessed in hopes she would leave with him. He was wrong, but Bernie liked his bike, and Ernie would give her a ride home.

"Beat's me," Bill's partner answered. He shaved his head, close enough to the skin that a thin layer of reddish-brown peach fuzz remained. Freckles and moles protruded through like drops of paint.

Dan shuffled the cards. "Why don't you come on back another night when he is."

After the Klan came to the club, Bill stopped having parties at the poker club. Instead, the poker club became what it was, a poker club. The club only opened after the sun went down. Everyone was still invited, but the crowd that came before trickled out. Instead the lonely and outcast gathered, to avoid the regular spots in town.

"If you're going to let me play, you might as well let him," Bernie said. She didn't know why the other men disliked Bill's partner, but liked Bill. She'd heard the rumors about him, sure, but most of them centered around the fact that he was seen walking around the seminary. Bernie saw him once, too. He was planting flowers.

Dan dealt her in, and she reached across the table for the cards. Her stomach was getting bigger. She'd found out about the baby a few weeks after Carol left her. The first letter she sent to Carol was to tell her she couldn't stop puking at the smell of her perfume. Carol hadn't written back.

"Sam, right?" Ernie asked.

Sam nodded. Dan licked his gums.

"Side's," Sam said, watching Bernie's fingers. "I have money to lose."

Sam stacked a number of bills on the table from his pant pocket. Ernie and Dan looked at it conspiratorially. Bernie wondered herself, where a man like that got money that tall. Bernie had never seen anyone with money like that in Puget.

"Where the hell'd you get money like that?" Dan said, his cheeks turning red at the peaks.

Sam's smile turned, slightly, moving just an inch down. "I didn't know it mattered to you folks, being that the club here is illegal and all."

Bernie's knee brushed Sam's. He barely flinched next to her. She flicked each card's edge with her thumb.

"I'm not playing with whatever that is." Dan got up, and a blonde man who had been sneaking to the bathroom every hour rose with him. "I don't want any business with it. Come on, Bernie"

"Not tired, thanks though."

"How're you going to get home?"

"Ernie here." Bernie motioned to Ernie.

“Sorry, Bern, I’m out too, Matilda’s birthday is tonight.” Ernie replied, putting on his jacket.

Dan stared Bernie down. She pursed her lips.

“I’ll walk,” she said.

Dan scoffed, turned, and left.

Sam laughed to himself, looking down at the table instead of watching the rest of the men leave the table.

Bernie set the cards on the table, lining the top card perfectly with the bottom.

“Can you play poker with two people?” Sam scooted further away from her. He pulled out the cigarette again and turned it in his fingers. He leaned back in his chair, stretching.

“Not sure,” Bernie said.

“We can play cribbage.” Sam got up and retrieved a chest from underneath the bar. He raised a board to her. “You know how to play?”

Bernie shook her head.

His lips curled up. “Well how’s about I show you, and then, if you’re feeling up to it, we can throw some money in?”

He was hopeful, and Bernie had no reason to be going home to her empty, old house. She nodded her head and pulled his chair out with her foot.

He wiped a hand across the board. Scars cut across his knuckles, lines and divots of tissue of white and pink. Bernie liked his hands. The wrinkles over his joints looked like the rings of a tree.

“You know basic math?” he asked. Bernie slid her cards to him. He opened the board and on it were little holes shaped into a long S, like a paperclip. Two red pegs, two blue.

“I do it when money’s involved.” Bernie grabbed the blue peg and lifted it up. He flushed out the deck.

“Pick a card. Low card gets first crib.”

Bernie cut the deck. Four of Hearts.

He tilted his head to Bernie, then drew his own card. Two of Spades.

“Cribs to me.” He gathered the cards quickly and dealt six cards each.

Bernie raised an eyebrow at him. “Lucky you.”

He chuckled. His teeth reminded Bernie of chicklet’s.

“You got any gum?” she said. If he didn’t she wouldn’t mind getting up and looking around. She wouldn’t have minded a drink either. But she knew she shouldn’t or couldn’t.

“Sure.” He pulled out a piece from his pocket, wrapped in foil.

Cinnamon flavor. Bernie hated cinnamon. She took it from him and popped it into her mouth. Her eyes watered.

“Now,” he started. “The goal is to get to 15 points, or get hands like flush, three of a kind, so on. We start with 6, and you put two in the crib. It’s my crib, so your two and my two are going to be mine. Try not to give me anything good.”

Bernie had three sixes, a king, a queen and a seven. She handed him the king and queen. “For you.”

“Thank you.” He winked at her, and Bernie was taken aback. He grew shy, coughing into his sleeve, tipping his head to the ground. She hoped the woman who exchanged money and served drinks didn’t see.

He placed two cards on top of hers, then pushed them off to the side. He gestured for Bernie to pick a card. She pulled it out and flipped it over. A ten.

“I’ve heard you live in the forest,” Bernie said, trying not to look at his face. The gum mellowed in her mouth.

“That’s right, Ms....” he paused, fanning his cards.

“Fields. My name is Bernie Fields.”

“Where is Mr. Fields? I don’t suppose he would approve of you coming to a place like this,” he said without accusation or judgment, but instead a light amusement. He placed a queen down. “Fifteen is two points, thirty-one is two points and a restart, you can get points for doubles, triples, and runs.”

Bernie nodded. She placed her seven. “Mr. Fields doesn’t exist in my family. It’s just me.”

“No daddy?” He placed a seven on top. “That’s two.” He moved his peg.

“Dead.” Bernie played her six. “That’s thirty-one.”

He nodded his head for her to move her peg, and she did, lining hers up with his.

“Sorry to hear that. You sure you aren’t married?” He looked up right at Bernie’s stomach.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Sam pursed his lips. “I grew up with enough sisters who got knocked up to know when a woman’s growing big.”

Bernie wasn’t *growing big*. Her stomach barely peaked out. Mostly you could tell around her face and breasts. They had grown almost twice their regular size, spilling out of most of the shirts she had. She imagined the baby in her stomach, a hard little nut, and sometimes if she pressed hard enough she felt it, but it wasn’t big enough for him to see.

He played, and Bernie played, and they moved their hands. “Look, not a judgment to be had over here, lady, I’m just trying to make conversation.”

“I would suggest you ask different questions then.”

“Alright, what’re you doing down in this club?” He smiled and laid his cards. “Zero for me.”

Bernie laid out her hand.

Sam said, “Three of a kind is 6.” Then he laid out the crib. The game was easy for Bernie to understand, poker with a different kind of pot, self-made.

“What are you doing at this club?” Bernie asked back.

“I live close, and who’s going to throw me out? Those guys? Hell, I’ve killed guys larger than that.”

He grinned and a shiny silver tooth shone from the back of his mouth.

“You have not.”

“How would you know?” Sam asked.

“I know a liar when I see one,” Bernie replied back.

A group of men, obviously paper mill boys walked in, serious, their grim eyes focused in on the bar. They were older, bearded, tired. Each ordered a whiskey and planted themselves at the bar.

“Difference is I ain’t a liar.” Sam shuffled.

Bernie spoke softer, “So you’ve killed men?”

Sam shrugged.

“You’re a very annoying man.” Bernie said.

He smiled letting out a little ‘Huh’ of a laugh.

“Only one or two,” he said.

“Who are you trying to fool?” Bernie threw her cards down.

“Who are you?” He gestured to her stomach.

“Oh hell, fine. I’m with child.” She felt like retching.

He stared at her, right down into her eyes, into her soul. Bernie felt like he was looking right through her skin, at the little baby growing inside.

“I do live in the forest,” he said.

Bernie’s interest peaked. She didn’t know anyone that lived in the woods, or had been in them willingly, except her own father. The game board scooted across the table where her elbow hit it, forgotten by both her and Sam.

“Liar,” she said in disbelief.

He raised an eyebrow and mirrored Bernie’s posture, head resting on the palm of his hand.

“Right inside, next to the lake.”

“I’ve never seen a lake.”

“When were you going into the woods?”

Bernie shut her mouth. He was prying. After what happened to her parents, her time in the woods felt like a dirty secret, or a secret that might put Bernie on the outs. Bernie had never told anyone about her rides with her dad in her life, not even Carol.

Except Bernie lived alone now, completely. None of them stuck around. Carol wasn’t speaking to her. Mom was dead. Dad was dead. Gun, frustrated with Bernie’s decision to run off and keep the baby, was gone. And Bernie was here, in a secret bar, with a secret man, and her secret baby.

“When I was younger. My dad used to take me on motorcycle rides through there.”

He looked impressed. “Brave man.”

She nodded. She’d never met anyone that interested her like Sam. She examined him. He had the cleanest skin, teeth and face of any man she’d met. He didn’t seem like he was trying to impress her, or like she needed to impress him. Instead, he just talked with her. Bernie considered this, the act of being listened and responded to, as a transaction. Yet, the exchange was invisible, and Bernie could not figure out what he was taking, and what she was giving.

“There’s a lake,” he said. Bernie believed him.

“You’ll just have to show me sometime then, liar.”

“Maybe I will,” he replied. Bernie’s chest fluxed, like her centripetal force of self was interrupted, being pushed against, until the spinning slowed.

## Chapter 24: Robbie, 1935

When they got home from John's house, Robbie moved into the house quickly, hoping to put distance between her and Leo. The door shut, and opened, and shut again. Leo pranced through the house like a musical number. He started a fire, he washed his hands. He put his coat away, went to the bathroom, and wiped down the mirror.

Robbie secured a spot in the living room, an exit at the front door, an exit straight through to the kitchen, and out the back.

The room, their living room, didn't feel like it belonged to Robbie. All the photos along the wall were black and white, and lifeless. Leo and Robbie's faces were transported from one photo shoot to the next with dim smiles. Leo's gun hung on two nails over the fireplace. The first deer he ever shot next to it, stuffed, big eyed. Two love seats planted in front of the fireplace. The room smelled of fire and bleach. Sometimes, Robbie would walk in on Leo aggressively thumbing the barrel of his gun, cleaning. At one point, he took a hammer to the wood floors, pulling up a plank that wasn't positioned the right way. A small crack split the wood.

Everything else in the room was placed symmetrically. If there was one of anything, there was an identical one on the other side of the room. Two lounge chairs, two coffee tables, a rug, split in half. In the center of it all, Leo's record player sat on a table, in between the lounge chairs, the equator of the room.

Leo put a record on, and a loud jazz song played.

"So." He pulled a cigarette from his pocket and lit it.

Robbie froze in place.

Robbie held her tongue. Without the betrayal of John fresh on her pallet, Robbie's chest stretched with anxiety. Leo loved her, but she recalled the way he grabbed her arm, the disgust,

the anger. If it had been any other man, the anger would have been embarrassing, but his inability to gain control positioned Robbie as both placater and obscenity.

Leo stepped closer to her.

“I’m pregnant,” slipped from Robbie’s lips.

He scoffed. “No you aren’t.”

Robbie stepped into a small, miniscule moment of relief. The baby served her in a way she hadn’t pictured before, as a means of protection. If there was someone else around, maybe Leo wouldn’t focus on Robbie. Robbie couldn’t see Leo coming anywhere near a kid.

In her silence, he got his answer.

“How did-“ He pinched his eyes. He flicked the cigarette and the ashes floated to the floor. The taxidermized bear’s mouth hung open, the fire licking at its teeth, glimmering, ferocious and hungry.

“You know exactly how,” Robbie spoke softly, easing him.

The saxophone dragged out long hard notes. Leo fingered something in his pocket, twisting it.

“How far along?”

“A few months.”

Leo stepped onto the carpet, methodically, leaving indents of his shoe. Robbie reflected his movements, opposite. He stood on the other side of the fire and they stared at one another. The fire flickered in his eyes. Symmetrically, they were outlined the same. For one moment, they were on even ground, even space between them, the fire drawing a line, his side and hers. He continued to move until they switched positions, and Robbie’s back was to the bathroom door.

Leo traced a finger over the frame of a picture of them at their wedding.

He tipped the picture over and the glass frame cracked on the mantel. Robbie jumped.

“Our life will be over.” He tipped another picture over and it crashed to the floor. The glass fractured into tiny pieces at his feet. Robbie backed up, gripping the bathroom door knob.

“Some kid,” he said. He raised his eyebrows at her. “Dirtying up our house. Do we not have a nice life?”

“We can have a nice life with a kid.” she replied.

“If it’s mine.” He pinched his lips.

Robbie was always with Leo. There was never a time he didn’t know where she was, or who she was with. She tried to recall a time or a place that would drive him to that thought. She came up empty.

Robbie fought with herself. On one note, she wanted to scream at him. He was being ridiculous. He was unhinged. When would she have the time with Leo always standing over her shoulder? The other half of her stood, frozen. She clasped the door knob in her hand, sliding under her sweaty palms.

“It’s yours,” she said with finality.

Robbie turned the doorknob. The second it clicked, Leo shot towards her. She shut the door just as his fist slammed into it, locking it behind her.

He screamed through the door, “Robbie you open this fucking door.” He slammed his fist into it. The wood splintered.

Robbie clutched the sink, clutched at her chest. Her heart slammed into her chest like a percussion drum. She turned the faucet on quickly, hoping to drown him out. The water slid down the sink. She kept her face down, avoiding the mirror. She didn’t want to see the fear on her face.

Eventually, he got tired, and left. On the door, a small hole, big enough to fit an eye into, had been punctured. She imagined what he saw. Her slumped shoulders over the sink, small, shaking.

In their bathroom, they had a large bath with legs stuck out like duck feet. The curtain spiraled around the entire tub. Robbie stepped into the tub, closing the curtain around herself. She laid her head back thinking, maybe, once the baby was born, he will be happy. He had to be.

Happy wasn't the right word. Happy seemed like a trivial term. Moments flew by in both of their lives and the only stuff that stuck with Robbie were the moments like this. She could barely remember her parents, her childhood, her friends. She remembered stepping into the forest, and sinking.

## Chapter 25: Parker, 2006

The Tina in ‘Tina and Louisa’s Psychic shop’ had been crossed out. It was a small pink and white building, sandwiched in between a pawn shop and a licensing DMV. There were bars over the windows, with plant fronds sticking out.

“This?” Parker asked.

Annie lifted their conjoined hands, and kissed the back of Parker’s. “They have the best reviews on Yelp.”

“How bad are the other psychics in Washington?”

“Come on, you Debbie downer.” Annie pulled her toward the door.

They decided, as a couple, according to Annie, Parker needed some help. Parker told her she was not going back to a therapist. She was happy with her life. This problem was something else. So there they were, at Louisa, not Tina’s, psychic shop.

The door let out a low baritone bell. The shop was disorganized in that feng-shui way, where the chaos made sense. Shelves were stocked with tarot cards, gems, and incense. Small potted plants that could be up for sale, or could be for decoration, were wilting on some shelves. It was dimly lit. Glow in the dark stars were attached to the ceiling.

“Cool.” Annie smiled.

“Welcome in!” a voice shouted from the back. Parker walked toward the voice, musing at the trinkets, different figurines were shaped ambiguously as a people.

“I’m going to get a voodoo doll of you,” Parker whispered to Annie.

“Only to be used for sexual purposes,” she replied.

“Deal.”

The voodoo shelf had bones, teeth, and feathers surrounding the dolls.

“I don’t understand how you buy into this stuff.” Parker picked up a tooth, perfectly white, fake. She put it back on the shelf.

“It’s real. Once I got my palm read at the fair. She said ‘You’ll get no peace.’ Weird phrasing, right?”

Parker nodded.

“Well, the next week I was in line at a street cart and I heard some guy say the exact same thing to his daughter, except he was talking about a piece of his food.”

“Wow, life changing.”

“You have to embrace the celestial Parker.”

“You are off your rocker.”

At the end of the store, a small room indented into the wall was covered by a pink curtain. A sign made from burned wood over the top read: ‘Readings’ in childish writing.

“Did you come for a reading?” the voice from earlier popped behind them. Parker swung around irritated.

“Don’t do that.”

“Sorry.” An Asian woman appeared, flushed a deep red and sweating. She held a small fan up to her face. Her fingernails were long, painted blue. “Did you come for a reading?”

Annie smiled at her warmly. “Yes ma'am. For this one.” She pushed Parker forward.

“Good.” The woman breathed out hard and fanned herself with her other hand. She gestured to the reading room curtain, pulling it back so they could walk in.

The room was brighter than the store, Himalayan salt lamps glowed throughout, illuminating newspaper articles pasted to the walls. A small table, and a large bedazzled purple throne-chair perched in each corner.

Parker looked back at Annie, trying not to laugh. Annie nudged her forward, hiding her own smile.

The store owner sat in the purple chair, and gestured for them to sit in the other two lounge chairs.

“I’m Louisa,” she said, rearranging papers on the table in front of her.

“What happened to Tina?” Parker asked.

“Tina has bad juju. She cheated on her husband.”

“I don’t think that’s the reason to get crossed out.”

“She left town and got married in Vegas. Come on.” Louisa waved them over.

They sat. Annie giddily bounced in her seat, looking between Parker and the psychic.

Parker sat back in the chair and fought the urge to lay her head back and close her eyes. There had to be something wrong. Parker was supposed to be waiting on Annie hand and foot while she carried the baby. Instead, Annie had been watching over Parker, hovering, like her dad used to do with her mom. As a result, Parker hid from her, locked away at the office.

Parker’s head felt like it wasn’t a part of her body. She floated above it all, she was being pulled up and out, plucked like a feather.

“What kind of reading are you looking for? I do tarot, I read palms, and for a special two-for-one deal, I do crystals.” The woman spoke with a descending tone, a diphthong that obviously originated from the south, though Parker couldn’t tell where. Parker and Annie shared a look.

“I’ll steer clear of any crystals.”

The woman shrugged. “No problem.”

“I think we will do Tarot.” Annie said.

“Yes! Of course, I have Tarot! Please come closer, closer.”

Annie and Parker pulled their chairs up to the table. The table was a mirror, glinting back Louisa’s palms, Annie’s ring, the vent on the ceiling.

Louisa took out a deck from underneath her chair, black and white, lacquered, the edges stripped of their finish.

Annie squeezed Parker’s thigh. The woman shuffled the deck by cutting it into three separate piles. The images disappeared in the mirror before Parker could see them.

“Okay, okay, now I want you to think of a question. Hard. You must really focus, that means no touching.” Louisa swatted at Annie’s hand under the table.

Annie pulled her hand back into her own lap.

“Think.”

Parker could not decide. Her first thought, the one sitting at the front of her brain for weeks, was *what is wrong with me*. But that was not what she wanted to ask. It seemed obvious, she was being haunted by a man or she was crazy. Despite the fact that, genuinely, she felt crazy, she didn’t think it was true. How could it be? How could both her mother and her be seeing the same man? How could he be turning up, over and over. How are all the women in her family dead?

Her lineage, the path of history was being stopped early, eradicated. A corruption of time was taking place and Parker could feel it in the way she moved, in the way her head lifted, that this was not how it was supposed to be. There was something else going on.

So she thought hard, she thought about her mother, and her mother’s mother, and even the mother before that. She thought about the junk in her mother’s room, the smashed vanity, she

even thought about her childhood dog, the one present her mother had bought for her that seemed to genuinely be for Parker, to make her happy.

*How do I stop him?*

Louisa stopped shuffling, locking eyes with Parker. The vent turned on above them. The fan blades whirled in the mirror table.

“Ready?” Louisa put the cards together into one deck. “Cut the deck.”

Parker cut the deck and Louisa pulled three off the top, laying them face down in front of Parker.

Louisa touched the tops of the cards with her hands. Her eyes closed. She stiffened before opening them again.

“Your first card is the past.” She moved her hand over each card. “Present, Future.”

Louisa flipped the first card, on it a picture of a woman wearing a crown, rising from water, holding a goblet.

“The Queen of cups.” Louisa nodded her head. “Cups represent emotion. Sometimes, they are meant to represent love.”

That seemed promising enough to Parker. She had a lot of love in her life.

“It is reversed though.” Louisa squinted at the card. “The queen of cups is strong and comforting, she is a mother, she is meant to make us feel safe, but the reverse, although not necessarily bad, stands for dependence, insecurity, martyrdom.”

“That absolutely sounds nothing like you,” Annie said.

“Maybe it isn’t about me,” Parker replied, enraptured by Louisa’s calling.

Louisa nodded at this. “Yes, the energy is different.”

“What does that mean?” Annie asked.

“That’s on her.” Louisa gestured to Parker, sitting back. “What question did you ask?”

Parker started to speak, but Louisa silenced her by slashing her hands through the air.

“For you! For you! Do not tell.”

Parker nodded. *How do I stop him?* she thought. *How do I stop him?*

“I got nothing.” she said.

Parker truly had nothing. She didn’t know anything from the past. In fact, the past evaded her in ways it didn’t others. She had no history beyond her own. She had no memories of her tragic family, only stories.

“Let’s move on then. Maybe something will pop up.” Louisa cracked her fingers.

She flipped the next card, on it a reaper held onto a scythe. “Death.”

“Awesome,” Parker drawled.

Louisa brushed her fingers along with edges tenderly. “Death does not mean death.”

“Thank god.” Annie intertwined her fingers on her baby bump. Underneath her shirt, a vivid, pink scar of a handprint was still visible.

“Death is one of the Major Arcana. Death is not death. It is an equalizer. Everyone is purified in death. It is reincarnation. It is the end of cycles.”

“If you break up with me, I’ll straight up kill you.” Annie stood. “Bathroom?”

Louisa pointed to the back. “That way.”

Annie left the room.

Louisa flipped the next card. Upside down a man with a long beard, one hand reaching toward the top of the card, holding a wand, and the other pointing down. It faced Louisa. The woman’s hair flopped in front of her face; her expression pinched in the table mirror.

“Another Major card.” She pushed the card towards Parker who didn’t touch it or lift it up. “The magician is meant to represent as above, so below.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that the world is a reflection of heaven. The microcosm reflects the macrocosm. The magician connects the four elements together. When faced toward you, of course, but he is backwards here.”

“So, heaven is a reflection of me?” Parker grinned.

Louisa shook her head. “The magician is powerful, when reversed he is a sign of deceit, manipulation, trickery.”

“You seem alarmed,” Parker stated.

Louisa smiled. “Not at all. I see cards every day.”

“So, I’m not special?”

“Depends on the question you asked.”

Annie walked back into the room. She plopped next to Parker, brushing a hand over her neck.

“What did I miss?”

“Manipulation and deceit are in my future.”

“Interesting. Maybe I cheat on you.”

Parker bristled. “I love that you’re taking this seriously.”

Annie pulled back. “You’re joking right?”

Louisa began to gather her cards on the table. The magician placed over the top, disappearing.

“Ah, no bad juju.” Louisa stood up. “Your cards are your cards. That will be fifty dollars.”

“Fifty!” Parker’s mouth dropped.

Annie reached into her purse and handed her the bills.

“What a crackpot,” Parker whispered as they left. Annie didn’t respond.

Parker knew Annie was mad at her, but chose not to engage.

“Nice show you put on in there,” Annie said as she opened the passenger side door of their Subaru.

“Oh, come off it.” Parker got into the driver's seat. The leather steering wheel was cold. *The leather steering wheel was cold. The car smelled like Leo, bleach and woods, sometimes blood, after he cleaned a deer. The front seat was too far back for my feet to reach and I had no idea how to adjust it. I screamed, the sound muffled by the shut doors. I really had nowhere to go. I wouldn't be able to get the car going if I wanted to, let alone drive it out of town. I hit the windows, the steering wheel, the center console, the radio. The thought of Leo coming home to an empty house wrung me dry. I couldn't leave him. Even if I learned, somehow to drive, I wouldn't be able to get down the road without believing Leo, the real Leo that I loved, was hiding beneath the hot, acidic changeling that plagued their house. I traced my thumb over the door handle, knowing I would go back inside.*

“You come off it! I’m not taking this seriously. Really? I’m the one who dragged you here, and I’m the one with the handprint on my stomach.”

“I wasn’t thinking.” Parker put the car in drive. Annie faced the window.

“Insecurity is really cute on you.” Annie replied.

Parker fumed. “I don’t want to make a joke out of this. You always make jokes out of everything.”

“So do you!” Annie yelled.

“I’m scared.” Parker’s voice cracked. She wiped at the tear coming down her cheek stubbornly.

“So am I,” Annie replied, but did not reach out to Parker.

Parker did not apologize. Annie’s anger faded with sleep. Both women felt a tension rising between them, hot and acidic.

## Chapter 26: Mitchie, 1986

There was no one to love Mitchie. She had ruined herself, presented herself to everyone tattered, dirty. Every moment, she thought about when the next time the ghost would appear. She stopped taking the pills the second he appeared to her again. This time, in the rearview mirror of Carol's car. He was the reason for the pills. If he still came to her, why take them?

"Honey?" Rex entered her room.

"Hm?" She hummed, the sound vibrating close to her chest.

"Honey, what's wrong?" Rex sat next to her on the bed, cradling her arms.

Mitchie grabbed them, softly at first. There was skin and under that skin, there was flesh, and under that there was bone. "You think I am crazy," she said.

"No." He laid down, curling into her body. "I think you have something going on. Maybe it's the hormones?"

She turned on him. "You think I'm seeing a ghost because I'm on the rag?"

"Well, no, I mean I don't know. You don't think you're overreacting a bit? It could've been a lot of things. I'm not saying it's all hormones, but don't you think that might have something to do with it?"

He was gentle. He moved his hands up and down her arm. He kissed the back of her neck, like he used to. He held her body in a way that made her feel desirable, beautiful.

"Maybe," she conceded, turning to him and running a hand over his beard.

He mirrored her movements, running his hand over her hair, down her cheek, over her lips. He took his time. Mitchie turned until he resettled on top of her. She was small underneath him, cocooned under his body, safe.

“Maybe we should hit the road again?” He whispered in her ear. The scruff of his beard tickled.

“And go where?” she asked. She couldn’t imagine going anywhere in her mental state.

“The beach? We could go down the Oregon coast and head to California.” Rex took strands of her hair, one by one, and tucked them behind her ear.

“Parker is in school.”

“We’ll leave her with Carol for a few days, yeah?”

Being free of Parker for a few days might give Mitchie a chance to clear her head. She nodded at him and he smiled down at her. He leaned in to kiss her and she wrapped her fingers around his face. He moved over her, holding himself up by his arms. Rex was always tender. He took his time when parenting, when playing his music, in bed. He never rushed, even at those times when Mitchie wished he would. Sometimes she wished they had a passion together, that they were desperate for one another, but the wish didn’t descend deep. Mitchie wouldn’t know what to do with passion. She would think he just wanted her for her body, not to love. His steadiness was why Mitchie chose to marry him.

He kissed across her neck, down her collarbone, and hit a spot that made her arch into him. She slid under him, further into the bed, so she could peek between his arm and make sure the door was closed.

“It’s been a long time,” he said.

She clawed at his back, pulled him closer, squeezed her eyes shut.

She moaned.

Mitchie opened her eyes, and Rex was gone.

Above her, Leo smiled, holding himself up by his arms, settled between her hips.

A bubble rose from the pit of her stomach to the tip of her throat. Her chest rose and fell like cylinders.

He leaned down, and his lips touched the base of her throat.

Mitchie didn't feel the scream rip out of her, or her fingers on his skin, but she saw it. Leo pulled back as Mitchie scratched at his eyes, leaving deep, bleeding scratches down his face. She ripped and screamed and finally, Rex broke through screaming her name. She closed her eyes tight, wailing, crying out for him.

When Mitchie opened her eyes, Leo was gone and in his place, Rex clutched his eyes, rolling off her, onto the floor.

"Fucking Christ, fucking Christ," he screamed at her. He glared up at her from the floor with hatred, a blackness.

Mitchie brought her fingers to her mouth. She tasted tears and rust. Blood covered her fingernails, crusted into the sockets. A hunk of skin hung on her ring finger.

Rex got off the floor and ran to the bathroom.

Mitchie went after him, hopping off the bed, trying to grab his hands, which he ripped from her. "Rex, I'm so sorry."

"Get the fuck off me, Mitchie."

"Rex," she said desperately.

"Get the fuck off!" He ripped his hands, and slammed the bathroom door in her face. Mitchie sunk to the floor.

There was no sound except the water running and Rex murmuring to himself. It seemed, Leo had left her alone for now.

Mitchie hugged herself. She thought, *Why is this happening to me, had I not been through enough. A mother that didn't love me, that drank herself to death. I had never had friends. I had never been truly loved. For once I want to feel content.* She allowed herself to fill up like a balloon with it. She wanted a break. Anger ripped through her arms. She stood up.

Her face grew hot. She turned to the wall and slammed a fist into it. Her wrist tweaked backwards and she flinched, but threw it against the wall, again and again and again.

Leo wouldn't take something from her without having something taken from him. She trampled down the stairs, into the basement, ignoring the lights along the way. She ripped open the boxes, one after the other, until she pulled out the box of toys, the pictures of Leo and Robbie together, and a box she glanced at the last time she was in the basement. A taxidermized deer, gleaming with a coat of dust.

Rex left the house, nursing the wounds on his eyes, the scratches like tear streaks on his face. He called Carol to keep Parker at her house, and Mitchie was grateful for it. She hoped beyond hope by the time Parker returned, the blood would be cleaned from his skin, the wounds subtle, less angry. She hoped Rex would not forget per se, but in the moment she thought he might find her bearable once again, if he could pretend they were alright, at least, in front of Parker.

The second he left, Mitchie brought the deer up from the basement. Her fingers wrapped around the head, sweat fingerprints indented in the fur.

The house clenched around her, as if to tell her not to go, don't do it, stop. The floorboards did not squeak as she walked up the stairs, the hallway leading out the back door filled with clutter; Rex's work boots, and wet work socks lie across the floor, Parker's broken

tricycle leaned on one wheel against the wall, coat's piled up so high on the rack, they were really hanging from one another. The phone hung off the hook, dangling from its spiral cord.

The hallway opened to a backdoor. The door stuck inside the frame from the swelling of the heat on the metal locks. Mitchie wrenched it, and it opened with a grunt.

The backyard was out of control. The grass had grown past her knees, moss and weeds grew between cracks in the paved walkway. Old play houses were grown over, inhabited by spider webs and a green slime coating the walls. Further out, underneath an old pine tree, an oil barrel Rex had said he would build a fire pit out of lay on its side, once silver against the sun, now a dark, dull red with rust.

Mitchie went to the barrel, holding the head out like an offering. She placed it on the ground while she gathered wood, small sticks from the surrounding trees, some old chopped kindling Rex brought home after a camping trip. Mitchie piled newspapers in her arms: Girl Found! I Lost weight so fast my doctor told me to Stop! Girls Girls Girls! Call them all! Allegation Rock Governor Race!. She stuffed them at the bottom of the barrel, stacking wood over the words. Covering the faces of bobbed haircuts and plump lips.

She piled them high into a pyre. She went inside to grab a lighter, and there one was, waiting for her on the counter. The can of gas rested against the side of the house. Tucker came from upstairs, stirred from the commotion, and followed her out the door. She didn't bother to leash him, but there wasn't a need. He circled around Mitchie, watching her frantic fingers trying to flick the light.

Mitchie thought this had to be it. Somehow, his spirit lingered on earth, inside her house, and outside of it. So it must be something else keeping him there, something important to him. When he saw his belongings in flames, his attention would turn from her, if only for a second.

She poured the gas over the top of her creation. The fire mushroomed around the can and up, burning stuffy, white smoke up in the pine needles of the trees.

“What are you doing?” Leo’s voice came from behind her.

“Getting rid of this, of you,” Mitchie screamed. Her mouth opened and she was glad it was falling out of her, pouring from her mouth like sludge. “YOU I’M GETTING RID OF YOU, YOU, I’M GETTING RID OF-”

“Stop that.” Leo calmly stepped forward. His face blurred from the smoke.

Mitchie shut her mouth but whipped toward the head. It felt lighter than anything in the world.

Leo watched her intently, laughing at her behind his eyes.

“You can’t get rid of me.”

Mitchie’s eyes were wild, frantic in the fire. The smoke followed her, billowing into her face and making it hard to breathe. She let it fill her eyes. She let the tears fall to her feet.

“Can’t I?” Mitchie tossed the head into the fire and Leo’s nose flared.

“Burn it then.” He shrugged. “It won’t stop me.”

Mitchie began nodding. She trampled back inside, gathered the box of toys, the pictures. “How about this?”

Leo moved closer to her. Tuck circled Mitchie’s legs, whining frantically.

Mitchie threw the box of toys into the fire. It sank to the bottom of the pit and the plastic figurines darkened, pressed into a log, forming a scar around the bark.

A wind blew through the yard, sweeping the smoke across the air into the body of Leo, his form absorbed it before it swept out behind him.

“Stop.”

“Leave us alone,” Mitchie demanded.

Inside the fire, the deer’s skin melted. Its eyes and mouth drooped into the flames.

Leo walked without looking at her and it was the first time Mitchie thought he truly looked like a ghost. He floated through the air, or air moved through him as he walked. He walked around her in a circle, far enough away where Mitchie did not immediately turn to match his stance.

“Mom?”

“Mitchie?” Carol ran toward her, clutching Parker by the hand. “Mitchie, what are you doing?”

Leo’s gaze fixed on Parker. He waved to Mitchie before disappearing in the smoke.

## Chapter 27: Bernie, 1955

Sam's dog, Lil Bit, was laying outside the poker club. Lil bit was old, his childhood dog Bernie would guess, though she had no idea. The dog had missing teeth so her tongue hung from her mouth, but she had nice fur. Something Bernie admired in old dogs.

"Hey, Bit," she said.

Lil' Bit looked up at her with those beady black eyes, empty. Poor gal, Bernie thought. Bernie opened the door and the music poured out into the open air before the door closed behind her.

There was loud, upbeat music playing from the speakers, something new, something they didn't usually play. Everyone was smiling, drinking. Fred Jamison leaned over the poker table, pulling at Ernie's ear while Ernie was red in the face, accentuating his apple cheeks, and skinny neck.

Laughter echoed out and was swallowed up.

Sam stared at Bernie.

She could feel him before she even saw him, although she didn't want him to think she had been looking. He was standing across the room, leaning up against the wall underneath a bull head, smoking a cigarette. No one smoked like him. He held the smoke in his mouth, watered it down with spit. When the smoke came back out, it was milky.

Bernie wasn't walking over there. She didn't want the guys to think she was with him or what not. Not because she was thinking about that, but because men didn't know this from that. Ernie and Bill would latch their eyes onto her breasts when she walked by just a few months ago, and now they latched onto her stomach, bulging out like some kind of alien.

Bernie sat down next to Ernie, pulling the chair back enough she could fit her stomach through. The baby was large enough to be annoying, but not large enough to keep her in bed.

“Bernie! Come to give us more of your money?” Fred sat back down, shuffling the deck in his hands.

“It’s always funny to me. I come here every week, take all your money, and still can’t get you to stop talking.”

Fred dealt the cards, worn out from hundreds of games, a little sticky.

Sam pushed himself from the wall, pulling the chair opposite from Bernie out and sitting down.

Fred dealt Sam cards and he tipped them up from the table, looking at the corners. He took another pull from his cigarette. The other men grew quieter.

Sam wore suspenders over a nice white shirt. His hands could cover his cards just by laying over the top of them.

Bill, with his thick black mustache, licked his lips, brushing the tips of his grizzly hairs. He threw a few chips in, avoiding all of the table's gazes. Out of everyone, Bill was the best poker player, but more than that, Bill got on with everyone. Sam and him were rumored to run some type of back alley business together. Bernie wasn’t sure if it was illegal, but if there was proof, an inkling outside this poker table, they would shut the club down.

“I’ll raise you,” Sam said, throwing more chips into the pot and glancing at Bernie.

She held a pair of jacks, not a bad hand. Better than most she suspected.

“Check,” she said.

Ernie and Fred checked. It would be a pot.

“Alright boys, this’ll be a good one.” Ernie flipped the cards on the table. For Bernie, a full house.

She kept her face still. She rested the cards in her hand on her belly, peeking at them every few seconds as if she was worried. She was going to bury them.

Sam was nodding his head to himself. Ernie was transfixed on the cards in Sam’s hands, or maybe the rings he wore, one on each finger, even his thumbs.

“Fold.” Fred flipped his cards, he had nothing.

Bill grinned at me. When Bill smiled his eyes shrunk, small and warm. Bernie winked at him.

“Ernie?” She turned to him. “Don’t be a girl. Come on, play it.”

Ernie rubbed his bald head. He was sweating. Ernie was a terrible poker player and insecure. He pulled his lip in and out of his mouth, like a trout.

“Bernie, you shut your mouth. Folding is smart. You can ask my wife.”

All of them laughed. The week before, Ernie’s wife, Matilda, stormed into the club, scraping all their money from the table and throwing it into her apron pocket. Not a single one of them protested.

“I’ll raise.” Ernie threw a few more chips in.

“Fold.”

“Fold.” Bill clapped Fred on the back and pulled a cigar from his pocket.

Sam and Bernie stared at each other. He matched the middle.

“Raise,” she said for the last time. She didn’t have enough if Sam took her any higher.

He contemplated it, running his fingers over his cards once, twice. He picked them up and threw them back down. “Folding.”

Bill clapped his hands hard. Some ashes from his cigar fell onto the table.

“See that, Bernie. You aren’t even fun to play with!”

Bernie started gathering up their chips. There was a good twenty dollars in the pot, enough for dinner and maybe a new dress.

“Not my fault you are a bunch of sissies.” She flipped her cards and they all groaned.

“God damn.” Sam flipped his cards. He had a full house with queens.

“Sammy boy got played,” Ernie said laughing with the rest. “Come on, give us a chance to earn it back.”

Bernie pocketed her chips, shaking her head. “Ernie, go home. I don’t want your wife coming back in here and embarrassing you again.”

“Yeah, next time she’ll take you out by the ear,” Fred replied.

Bernie walked away, taking her earnings to the woman who ran the tables. Her name was Emma or Emily. Bernie couldn’t remember. She exchanged Bernie, and Bernie went outside for a smoke.

She sat on the bench next to Lil Bit. It was a nice, warm, summer evening. Outside the poker house, the forest reached up to the sky, each branch a different level of the air, like a ladder.

Bernie took a deep pull off her cigarette and held the smoke in her mouth the way Sam did. It burned. She swished it like water, around her teeth.

The door opened again and Sam walked out into the night air.

“Mind?” He lifted a cigarette up. Bernie shook her head and gestured for him to stand. Lil Bit’s tail thumped on the floor underneath her feet, but she didn’t get up.

She let the smoke out of her mouth and it came out milky, like his. If he noticed, he didn't say anything. He didn't even take a pull. He just lit his cigarette and let it hang from his long fingers.

Inside the window, Bill was laughing, slicking his hair down before replacing his cowboy hat on his head. He turned to Bernie and waved.

"You shouldn't be out here," Bernie said.

"Why's that?"

"You know why, don't pretend stupid."

He raised an eyebrow at her. He leaned into the window. "No one's paying attention."

Bernie's heart jumped.

"Sides, they won't say anything to me."

He didn't elaborate but she knew what he said was true. There were so many rumors about him it was hard to keep track. Whenever he came into town it was an event. Women thought he did some sort of hoodoo that scared the men from him. Other's said he had gone on a bender when he was young, taking young men's wives from them into the forest. The kids even said looking him in the eye brought bad luck.

"Why is that? Why are all those men afraid of you?" she asked.

He took a drag, taking his time.

"I told you. I've killed people before." He grinned.

"Come on." Bernie blew out smoke.

"You get a rumor going about you." He paused. "That can carry you through this life."

He stepped away from her. The door opened and two drunk men clinging onto one another stumbled down the steps.

“Matter of fact, I can go in there right now and start one for you.” He kicked some dust, smiling, with the cigarette in between his teeth. He looked directly at the bump. Bernie laughed.

“Do me a favor, tell them I’m just getting fat.”

He nodded contemplating. “I could tell them it’s a tumor or something.”

She tucked her hair behind her ear. “You’re right. Fred’s fat, I’ve never looked better.”

He hums to himself.

“So, who did knock you up?” he asked.

Bernie scoffed.

“Come on now. Who’s going to care what I say?”

“God.”

She leaned over and put her hand on Lil Bit, whose tail started again. Bernie’s cheeks got hot.

His chest stuttered as he laughed. Bernie had never seen him laugh. It was like he was trying to hold it in his chest, to stop it from coming any further.

“How was that?” His eyes glimmered at her.

Bernie raised an eyebrow at him.

“Getting screwed by god.” he continued.

Lil Bit licked Bernie’s fingers. Leaning over hurt her back, so she sat back up. “Good. Great. Can’t you see I’m having the time of my life?”

Bernie closed her eyes and listened to the crickets hum.

Sam nodded. “I always wanted a kid. Although I wouldn’t ever have one of my own, not in this world.” Sam threw his unfinished cigarette on the porch and stamped it out with his foot.

“Makes sense,” she said. “I pray this kid’s a boy.”

“Why’s that?”

Bernie couldn’t imagine having a little girl. Watching her live in this world where women got nothing. She wished she hadn’t said it out loud.

“Girl’s always get the short end of things.”

“Right.” Sam puffed his cigarette. The cricket’s chirped.

“Well, you can’t have mine if that’s what you came out here for,” Bernie said.

“What?”

Bernie pointed to her stomach, “My kid.”

He laughed aloud. She expected him to have an ugly laugh since he held it in, but it was soft and raspy. She wanted to hear it again.

“Here,” Sam sat down right next to her. Her throat closed and her heart beat hard, once, twice. She scooted as far from him as she could. In the window, the men sat back down at the table, focused in on their game. Everyone faced away except Bill.

“Your light went out.” Sam lifted a lighter in the air, shaking it, as if to say, it’s safe.

Bernie took the lighter from his hand.

She flicked at it with her thumb over and over, but her fingers shook, and the light wouldn’t catch. It sparked under her thumb.

“Here.” Sam reached over, his large hands hovered for a second before cupping over Bernie’s. The bottom of his hand touched her fingers. Bernie held her breath.

Their eyes met.

Bernie flicked the lighter, breathing in the smoke and the trees on his hands.

## Chapter 28: Robbie, 1935

“Do you need anything from the store?” Robbie walked out into the barn.

Leo had been in the barn for almost two days except to sleep, coming in in the late hours of the night, standing over her for half a second before stripping down to his long underwear and leaving enough of a gap in between them that Robbie, who woke with his footsteps, felt as if she was in the bed alone.

Leo didn't look up from his work, tanning a hide, rubbing acid over the skin side and pinning it up to the window with clothespins.

“Leo?”

He didn't reply.

“You're going to have to talk to me eventually.” Robbie didn't know if she believed that.

“Why would you need me? You have the baby now.”

“Our baby. What are you talking about?”

“You lied to me.”

“For a reason!” Robbie threw her arms up.

Leo's face rippled with annoyance. “Because what? There's never an excuse to lie.”

Robbie scoffed, recognized she shouldn't have, looked at the ground. Leo had lied. He lied the day they got married. Robbie had signed the marriage certificate and handed the paper over without looking at it. Robbie Fields. She was now truly, insurmountably Leo's. They were on the same side of the earth, the state, the house, the room. A conjunction of names, like one minute, Robbie was half of an amoeba, and now together they were a bacteria. But it had been a lie. Leo had never joined her. It was her baby, not his. His house, not hers.

“I thought you would be mad.”

“Of fucking course, I would be mad. You lied. How am I supposed to even know if that baby is mine? Hm? You little slut. You can’t prove that it’s mine.”

“Leo, I am always around you. You are always watching me. When would I have trailed off?”

Leo shrugged, cold, cruel. “We both know you’re a sneaky little whore.”

Robbie stood in the doorway of the barn. She stood there for hours in her mind, she turned to stone there. The conversation stayed the same, repeating with different words, but worn out from lack of novelty.

As her belly grew, Leo picked and chose when he would speak with her. When he was in a good mood, when he had news, when he was hungry, but it was no longer the same. Robbie was truly alone.

## Chapter 29: Parker, 2006

Annie was inside screaming at her phone. Annie didn't actually scream, but her voice hardened into a knot, terrifyingly unnatural. Of course, Annie had been angry before but not manically like she was. She paced back and forth across their kitchen, wiping away tears and sweat from her face. The yellow lights flushed out her skin. Parker wanted to hold her, but she was so tired.

The stress couldn't possibly be good for the baby. The baby Parker already loved so much. She would love it, it could be anything.

"She isn't sleeping. She isn't eating. What do you mean there isn't anything wrong with her?"

Parker hoped their kid would be more like Annie. Annie was the brave one, the confident one, the kind one. At one point in her life, Parker believed she was incapable of love. Parker slept her way through town, indescribably lonely. Everyone she met, at least every gay person, was U-hauling with their partners, securing their place as a couple. Finally, the world opened up to them, regarding them as slightly less repulsive, and they flocked to one another. Some of Parker's friends who were in relationships argued, day in and day out, and she thought to herself, what was the point? They don't even like each other. That wasn't love, it was loneliness and desperation.

But then she met Annie, and she would meet their kid. And she would love it, no matter what because that's real love, a giving.

Parker leaned her head on the porch.

She drifted off, and when she became conscious, she stood in the living room of the cabin.

At the cabin, Parker was no longer tired. She was refreshed, invigorated, for the first time in weeks. Her body languished, pushing through the air. The cabin wasn't the same as the last time. There was just the fire, the crossbow hung over it. The crossbow was made from a light wood, engraved using a wood-burning tool. Its handle off-white, strung with tight strings, trigger ready to be loaded.

And there was Leo.

“Hi Park,” he said coolly. His hands in his pockets. His mouth turned upward.

“Hi,” Parker replied. She left her fear buried inside her, where it melted away. In this dream cabin, there wasn't a need for it. Leo's form wasn't solid, as it was when she saw him in the real world. The edges of his body faded, wisped by the heat of the fire.

His head twitched, but he smiled, a smooth human smile. His hands left his pockets, and they were discolored, gray. He rubbed them together, then replaced them back in his pockets.

“I wanted to talk,” he said.

Parker wanted to sit, but there were no chairs.

“Why's that?” she asked.

“It seems, after how many years, I have finally met my match with you, Parker.”

“Well, I didn't have to try very hard then.”

He nodded. “No, I suppose you didn't.”

“What do you want from me?”

His lips twitched. “You are an abomination.”

The snowman from Rudolph the Red nosed Reindeer popped into her head.

“Homophobia really? So, I've heard,” Parker said. She took one step to the right. Leo mirrored her. His face slipped away from the light of the window.

“I don’t even mean it like that.” He walked in a spiral around the room.

Parker followed him, from the opposite side of the room, eyeing the window.

“Love is Love.” He shrugged with a dirty smirk. “Or whatever they say now. I think my real problem is your baby.”

Parker’s heart sank. Could he be in two places at once? Where was her real self? She felt herself getting pulled back, not like a fading, no, more like a jump, like taking a step down the stairs and realizing you’ve hit the bottom.

“Woah there, hold on.” Leo stepped toward her, and the falling feeling stopped. “Your girlfriend is fine. The baby is fine. The real problem is, the baby isn’t your baby.”

“Oh, here we go.” Parker had heard it a million times, in fact she heard it from her own father. That he was going to love the baby, but it wasn’t really his grandchild. How could it be without the blood? Blood is thicker than water.

“You’re jumping to conclusions, woman.” Leo stopped, facing her. Parker landed right next to the window, her back turned to it.

“Get to the point then.”

“The point is that I can’t have that. We need to keep the tradition going. Blood by blood. So, this baby isn’t going to make it. I’m going to make sure of that. Thing is, I still want you to have a kid, you deserve it after all you’ve been through. But it needs to be yours, blood to blood.”

“You aren’t going to come near my wife, or my kid.” Parker’s nostrils flare.

“Not your wife though, is she? Not your kid though, is it? Look, no one needs to get hurt here. I’ll leave Annie alone, if you pinky promise to have your own kid. No harm no foul.”

Parker sidestepped the window and set her hand on the ledge.

“Is that how it works?” Parker bent her knees subtly, trying to glance. Outside the window, darkness enfolded, stars sprinkled the sky, and the trees were shadows in the distance. They were in the forest, then. A long stretch of empty land reached out in the distance, a gravel road winding through it.

“Is that how what works?” Leo asked.

“Where are we?” Parker leaned down further.

“This is my house,” he began moving again, but Parker stayed. A fire lit up in the hearth.

“I’ve been here before I think.”

“Doubtful.”

“No, in real life. When I was really little I think.”

“Unlikely, this place was burned to the ground.”

Outside, a figure appeared. Walking across the land slowly, head hung low. Parker could tell it was a woman from her tiny form, and the long strands of hair in her face. She walked slowly, without shoes, her legs wobbled and knocked as she stepped on rocks and divots.

“Who’s that?” Parker looked back to Leo, who’s composure once again vanished for a second.

“Who’s who?” He started to walk to the window, but paused at the fire, staring into it. He shimmered, not there anymore but in two places now, in a fold in time almost. He staggered back.

Parker once again looked out the window and this time, the woman was right there, staring in at her. There was a finger sized hole in her chest, no blood, just an empty space. Her hair hung low, shrouding her face.

“Who is that?” Parker asked again.

Leo was breathing hard, his chest pumping up and down.

Back at the window, the woman pressed against the glass. Her hair no longer in her face, but her mouth open, gleaming with white teeth. Her eyes wide and frantic like a deer. She slammed her fist into the glass.

Parker woke up.

## Chapter 30: Mitchie, 1986

Tuck followed at Mitchie's heels, padding across the gravel. Mitchie was dizzy, nauseous. Her hands pressed into the side of the house, holding herself up as she walked to the car. The rain pattered against her hands, gathering in large droplets. Her hair stuck to the side of her face. Tuck circled her heels, nipping at them, but she ignored him.

She fell into the car door. Music poured from her open window. She shoved her palms flat against her ears.

"Please god," she said, tripping over her feet as she tried to push off the car. She fell into the mud on her knees.

The saxophone gained volume. The violins grew sharp like fingernails on a chalkboard. The ground sucked her feet underneath like wet clay. It flooded into the potholes of the driveway.

Sand skidded in her mouth. Tuck barked, sharply at her, which was the only thing keeping her grounded.

"Come on now. Get up." Leo's voice was close.

Tuck barked. Mitchie shook.

"Leave me alone," she wailed.

"Get up."

She crawled forward. The edge of her dress bundled around her thighs. She crawled until she was face to face with a puddle. Shaking, she hunched over it onto her elbows. Next to her, Tuck licked her cheek.

The water was muddled, and a growing film of dirt frothed at the edges.

Mitchie held on. Any second, Parker and Rex would pull into the driveway and save her. Any second now, but not that second, and the music grew louder.

Tuck sat next to her, panting, his eyes whaled and large. He was getting so much bigger, almost too big to pick up. Mitchie, who had never wanted a dog, realized she quite liked it. He brought presence into the house. A presence that was lacking even with other humans. All his pitter patter and his willingness to be called made connecting with him simple. He didn't ask for anything from her.

Together, they looked into the brown water. No reflection to be seen, but a disturbance in the surface, a shaking coming from beneath the ground, or maybe, in the air. Mitchie's mouth hung open. The music played. Tuck's nose touched the tip of the water leaning over.

A hand reached up from the water and grabbed around the back of Mitchie's head, pulling her deep into the puddle.

Mitchie's face sunk into the water and then into the mud. It filled her mouth with dirt and slime. The hand on the back of her neck shook with the pressure holding her under. She did not flail, merely held herself up by her hands so she did not sink further, pushing back just a touch weaker than the pressure pushing her down, imperceptibly, she sank and sank.

She could not breathe. She thought, this was it. He had taken everything from her anyway. She didn't want to take much more of this.

Then, the pressure was gone.

Mitchie pulled fast and hard up from the water and was met with silence, the type almost always found in nature, in which the outside settles into itself.

She gasped, spitting mud out from in between her teeth. The front of her dress was soaked in mud and water, and she was shaking. She wiped the mud from her mouth, her nose, her eyes.

Rex's truck pulled in the driveway. He stared at her, Parker in the passenger seat couldn't quite reach over the dash. Rex's mouth hung open in shock.

Next to her, Tuck was lying motionless in the puddle, his ears covered in the mud, his nose in the water still.

His tail touched her thigh, and she scooted over in the dirt so it wasn't touching her anymore. Rex got out of the truck, slamming the door hard, harder than she had heard him slam anything. Parker did not get out of the truck.

Mitchie cried, but the tears couldn't roll down her cheeks, so caked in mud.

"What the fuck!" Rex cried out, stomping through the mud. He wasn't wearing a jacket, "What the fuck, Michelle."

Mitchie started to shake her head, no, no, no, no.

Rex picked up the body of the puppy, kneeling and facing away from the car so Parker couldn't see.

"Michelle, what the fuck did you do?"

Mitchie reached out, the pad of her finger touched Tuck's foot. Rex moved away from her.

The car door opened.

"Tuck!" Parker called out for him. Rex's face purpled with rage. He stood, the dog pressed to his chest hard, he covered it with his arms.

"Dad, put him down."

Mitchie tried to stand but fell back in the mud.

“Parker, go inside.” Rex shoved passed her, moving quickly, too quickly. His feet slid in the mud. He opened the car door with Parker on his heels, shoving the body into the passenger’s seat, then locking the door.

“What’s wrong with him?” Parker yelled.

“Parker, go inside and wait for me there.”

Parker began to cry, she tried to look in the window, but could only see the tip of the dog’s face, unmoving.

“Let me see him!” Parker tried to get past Rex who grabbed her arm hard.

“Go inside!” He yelled, something Rex never did. Parker took a few steps back, then began to sob.

Rex pulled Parker with him as he moved toward the house. He walked her all the way to the porch and let her go. She started to wail.

Rex walked up to Mitchie who stared at her hands, who could not breathe still.

“Let’s go. We can’t do this anymore.”

The thought of getting into the car with that dead dog made Mitchie gag. She shook her head until Rex reached down, hooked his arm under her, and pulled her to her feet.

Mitchie didn’t know where he was taking her, but she knew it was for the best. The further away she was the less she would hurt. The less times she would need to explain the unexplainable. Maybe, wherever they were going, the ghost would not be able to follow.

Mitchie got into the car, refusing to look anywhere but out the window. Rex put the car in gear. In the rearview mirror, Parker sat on the porch. She had stopped crying and was just watching the wheels turn in the mud. She grew smaller and smaller as the car pulled from the drive. She would be waiting.

## Chapter 31: Bernie, 1957

The lake was called Clearwater lake because even if you rowed all the way out to the middle of it, the bottom was visible. The water was clean, clear, and uncontaminated. The trees hovered over the lake, their reflections bright and clear. Not like American lake close by, filled with goose shit, and beer cans, and the bums of cigarettes.

Mitchie toddled around. She just learned to stand up and walk, although she fell more than she made ground. Her hair was lighter than Bernie's, almost blonde. It soaked in the sunshine. Mitchie refused to wear shoes, sticks and rocks clung to the bottom of her feet, trailing behind her like a trail of breadcrumbs. Bernie let her. Sam said there weren't many snakes, and Bernie hadn't ever seen one.

All around the lake, blackberry bushes tangled together to form hallways into the forest. Small coverings for rabbits, coyotes, and even mountain lions. The last two years, Sam took Bernie out there in the summer; They picked blackberries for hours, stacking them into baskets and he made pies from them.

"Mitchie not so far," Sam said. Mitchie didn't even look at him, just kept toddling.

Bernie and Sam sat on a wooden bench Sam said his dad made. It was washed out, made from the driftwood of some beach on the coast he had trucked over.

"She's going to end up in the lake if you don't watch her." Sam went to stand up.

Bernie grabbed him, pulling him back to sit.

"That's what you're here for. So, I don't have to get wet."

Despite what she said, Bernie stood.

"I don't know how you think this kid will survive like that." He smiled.

Bernie agreed. Mitchie was so little. Everything about her. Her fingers, her toes, her arms and legs, her waist, the hairs on her head, her eyes, her eyelashes. Sometimes, while she slept, Bernie just stared at her and thought about how fragile she was. God, she loved the kid. All she did was poop, and cry, but Bernie stared at that sweet teary face and felt like she couldn't move, or if she did, the rest of the world would follow suit and she couldn't protect her daughter from anything.

"I'm serious grab her," Sam said, and Bernie rolled her eyes at him. Mitchie was nowhere near the water. She wasn't even standing anymore. She had fallen and was playing with sticks and rocks.

"Relax." Bernie stood over her daughter. Mitchie put a stick in her mouth and Bernie lifted it from her mouth.

"These woods are haunted, Bernie. We don't know what lingers around here."

"Here we go."

"That's why no one knows about this lake. A bunch of kids went missing, and now it's empty."

"Good. Now it's just ours and we can do what we want." She picked Mitchie up, who fussed, turning in her arms. Bernie held her tighter against her body and wiped the dirt off her face.

When Bernie turned around, Sam looked up at her from one knee.

"What the hell are you doing? Get up." Bernie shifted Mitchie to her hip. Her heart clambered up her throat.

"Shut up," He demanded. Bernie's mouth clamped shut. Mitchie grabbed onto her finger.

Sam raised an eyebrow. “I mean it. You better keep it shut until I get through this. I’m sweating.” He wiped his hands on his jeans.

Bernie nodded.

“I know we shouldn’t get married, but I want it so bad sometimes it crawls under her skin. I want you, and me, and Mitch, and to sit by a lake, and pretend life is beautiful.”

Bernie swallowed hard. She knew how he felt because she felt it too. Sometimes, it made her so angry that she couldn’t get what she wanted from life, that other people controlled what she did, and said, and loved. Mitchie stared at Sam, hard, quiet, like she knew this was a moment in life that would shake all of their roots.

Birds whistled. Bernie started to nod her head. Tears rose, and she let them fall freely.

“Bernadette Fields, without you I don’t know where I would be in this life, but I know I would be less, less of everything. Nothing would matter, and with you, nothing matters, and I am free because of it. I love you. Will you marry me?” Sam licked his lips.

“But,” she paused. Bernie put Mitchie on the ground and the kid climbed up her leg, “what if-”

“Will you marry me?” He repeated.

“Sam I-”

“Marry me.” He stood up and Bernie stepped back.

“You’re being an idiot-”

“Bernie.”

She shut her mouth. He stepped into her space and presented her with a ring, plain, golden, thin. She had no idea where he could have gotten it. It didn’t have a jewel on it.

Finally, Bernie nodded her head at him, and he kissed her.

Bernie was baptized late. Her father abhorred all religion, but her mother had done it in secret, on one of the few days of the year her father was gone. They dunked her in the water and she sank, and it felt like she had been washed, not of her sins, but of herself. This was different. Being with Sam felt like she had been returned to her body, full satiated, child-like.

He pulled away, smiling so big Bernie saw each tooth in his mouth. He grabbed her hand and tugged her finger out, slipping the ring on.

She wiped off her tears with the back of her hand.

“Mitchie come back here,” he called over Bernie’s shoulder, giving her another quick kiss.

Mitchie was standing on the edge of the lake. Her finger pointed at something on the other side. Bernie couldn’t see anything there.

Sam picked her up and spun her around. Her laugh reverberated through the forest.

Bernie stepped up to them, placing her feet where Mitchie’s had been. In the water, the clouds expanded in the sky, the trees curved, the birds sailed overhead.

On the other side of the lake, in the reflection of the water, it looked like there was a figure standing there, watching over them.

## Chapter 32: Robbie, 1936

Robbie's index finger lingered on the book page. Soft ink turned the tips of her nail black. The creased sound of the paper turning disrupted the stillness.

Leo's footsteps knocked against the wood floors of the kitchen. He and the house were working together to mock her—footsteps down the hall, curtains flapping against glass, water pouring from the drainpipe outside. Leo turned on the sink, filled a ceramic cup with soap. Robbie turned the page. No reaction from Leo, and the house flickered. She did not exist.

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Without the acknowledgment of her presence, Robbie spent time counting the minutes between conversation. She woke, ran her hands over the walls, rain knocked on the windows, she put dishes back in the cupboards, fog covered the ground, she couldn't fit into her dresses anymore, she made biscuits, she slept, she walked to the end of the driveway where no one would come, where no one would leave.

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Robbie dropped a spoon, and it clattered against the floor. Drops of hot gravy splattered down the side of the counter, sliding over the painted geranium to the knob. She couldn't bend over her blooming stomach to grab it. Instead, she left it on the ground. She walked into the living room as Leo passed her into the kitchen.

"Can you clean that up?" she asked him, but he did not look at her. He was no longer there, and no one answered.

The spoon stayed for weeks, amalgamated to the floor by the congealed food. Leo stepped over it, over and over it, until it was just another detail of the house.

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The screen on the front door shut in Robbie's face. She waited for Leo. Leo went to work, went to the store, went to the mechanic, went to get his paycheck, went to the neighbors. Robbie drew in the air from outside, inhaling it between her teeth, down the inside of her throat, expanding into the fatty meat of her lungs, which compressed out. Just as her stomach pressed out. Her belly got bigger, and she got smaller and smaller.

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Leo told Robbie a ten-year-old girl's body was found in the woods. Her chest fell, imagining a standalone woman wrapped too tightly in a flowered dress, holding onto her waist like the discolored organs were driving themselves out, the skin threadbare, too thin to immure the kidneys, the large intestines, the stomach. The mother would go to the funeral, dressed in veiled black, and her daughter would be dead. The mother would look in the mirror and put a butterfly clip in her hair, and she would be dead. The mother would cook hot chicken and rice, and she would be dead. The mother would clean the crumbs from inside her oven, and she would be dead. The mother may have another child, and her first would be dead. The mother would divorce, and she would be dead. The mother would grow older, read books, see movies, and she would be dead. The mother's own body would plop onto the concrete where she walked, leaving behind a lung, a spleen, a chewy ventricle of the heart, and her daughter would be dead. Soon after, the mother's mind would wander from her, and she would catch glimpses of it, and be relieved it was gone, because if it was gone, she wouldn't have to remember that she was dead, she was dead. There are no more parts to her insides, only hallowed walls.

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Robbie and Leo stood in opposite rooms. Robbie in the kitchen, looking in on Leo cleaning his shoes in the living room armchair. His horse-hair shoe brush scraped back and forth.

She picks up a plate and rubs a dry towel back and forth, in time with him. The doorway to the kitchen served as a divide of parallel universes.

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Robbie's water broke in their bed, and for the first time in days Leo touched her, pushing her out of the bed, wrapping a robe around her shoulders, leading her to the car. The car pattered, jostling her as she pushed out shallow, poached breaths.

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The hospital room was not cooling down, although they had turned off the overhead light and Robbie had kicked off the blanket they had given her. Her blood was smeared onto the metal instruments littering the table next to her, soaked through the sheets beneath her, caked onto the skin of her thighs.

A nurse with a wandering eye mopped the blood up with white rags that turned pink and wrung brown, her eye penduluming as she moved back and forth. Robbie barely remembered the pain now. It lingered, a rolling ache, yet the pain became papery, bucking under her memory. Robbie imagined her memories as quicksand, and the moments of pain clambered over each other, trying to get out, being dragged down by the movement of all of the other grains sinking down.

“Almost done cleaning up, honey.” The nurse with the lazy eye left the room with the rags and the basin.

Alone, Robbie drifted to sleep.

When she woke up, she was in a different room, in a different bed. Around her were a few other beds, mostly empty. Gates framed the beds.

Leo argued with a nurse outside in the hall, his jaw expanding, crawling up and down his cheek. With an air of finality, Leo turned from her, looking until he found the doctor, who soon shook his head in the same way.

The nurse came back into the room carrying a small, bundled baby. Leo left his conversation and tip-toed behind her, peeking over her shoulders. Leo's eyes danced in between Robbie's legs, averting when he caught her straining to see him.

"Here you go, Mama." The nurse leaned over Robbie, placing the swaddled baby into her arms, fussing. "She's beautiful."

Leo stepped around the nurse, lingering in the corner.

The baby squirmed, stuck its tiny hand out of the blanket and began to cry. Her tiny, swollen face scrunched as Robbie rushed to get her arms around her body, bringing the baby to her breast.

The nurse wiped a finger across the baby's forehead, feather light strands floated back down to her skin. Leo moved closer, sitting on the edge of the bed.

Robbie felt herself deflate. She locked eyes on her child. If she had had a boy, things might've been different. He might've grown to be strong, and big, and kind. Robbie wanted to pinch the fragility from her cheeks.

"What's her name?" the nurse asked as she pulled a white curtain around Leo.

Leo grabbed Robbie's leg, squeezing it lightly.

Robbie hadn't considered it, yet. It felt like the most important decision in the world.

"We hadn't talked about it," Robbie said.

“Well, now’s the time.” The nurse smiled and left them alone.

“We could name her after my mother,” Leo whispered, and Robbie shut her eyes at the sound.

“Bernadette,” he said and grabbed onto the baby's finger. Robbie reached out, put her finger over the top of his.

Robbie nodded, brushed the blanket away from her face. “Little Bernie.”

“Johns in the waiting room for you.” Leo said.

Bernie fussed, unlatching, and moving away. Twisting back and forth as much as her neck would allow her.

“Look.” Leo ran a hand through his hair, pushing it away from his face. “I know things have been uncomfortable between us.”

The doctor walked past. The nurse closed a different curtain. A phone rang.

All the air left Robbie’s body. A ripple, small enough it passed quickly, gripped her throat. Those months of silence, for nothing.

“But I think we need to move past it. I forgive you. I-” he touched the bed. Robbie leaned away.

“Robbie, I’m sorry,” Leo continued.

Robbie softened; Her name rested on his lip, tenderly. She had not heard him say her name in months. It curled like a flower blooming.

He reached over, slowly, knowing she was following his hand. He placed it on the back of her head and patted her hair down. Despite the sweat crusted in it and knots in the back. He brushed it down, gentle as a plane lifting from the ground.

The baby let out a small noise, a sigh of contentment. Her small face tucked into Robbie. Everything about her was delicate, her see-through eyelids, her pink skin, the pudge on her hands. The small creature Robbie had given life to, was discernible to the world now. Leo's shadow fell over the baby's face. His body hovered, darkening the light touching her, darkening the light touching them both.

His hand gripped Robbie's, slowly pulling it away from Bernie's face. His finger replaced it, wiping down the baby's cheek.

"She looks just like me," he said.

For the first time in a year, Robbie felt like she could sleep. Leo, for all his faults, was not a self-hating man. If anything, he loved himself too much to love anyone else. He never got tired of being himself. Not in the way Robbie did. There would always be a sort of disappointment with everyday life because she was trapped inside this vessel going nowhere, like a spider, fossilized in resin. It was lonely being loved. But if Bernie was a reflection of Leo, maybe, she could be safe. Leo could love her if she did not look like Robbie. She could avoid the viscid gold sap.

Her black hair was thick like his. Her skin had the same reddish tint. Most of all though, her little mouth was the same. In due time, her mouth would open, and she would smile at her father, a pair colluded on one side of the door while Robbie lingered on the other.

## Chapter 33: Parker, 2006

Parker was outside the cabin, which meant once again, she was asleep. The cabin was different this time around. To start off with, the door was open, the light of a fire licked the floorboards. Outside, the air was crisp, open, a thumbnail of the sun still left over the horizon of pine trees. The sky expanded purple and orange over wide open fields of marigolds and violets. Parker walked through the grass and let the strands tickle her ankles. Birds chirped behind the sounds of laughter in the distance, far away, a small echo.

She walked up the steps. The floorboards creaked. Inside, the sounds of low, murmured gossip chattered. It reminded Parker of her mom and Carol when they were still alive. Her mom would bring Parker to Carol's house of pastel yellows, white tablecloths, doily cloths and fake baskets of fruit. Carol's friends would gather round, drinking tea with shots of bourbon in them, and gossip low under their breath, as if the whole neighborhood was trying to listen in the cracks of the windows.

Parker noted the differences between this cabin and the cabin she met Leo in, same structure, same door, same fire poker in the corner. Brighter, the fire roared orange and brilliant. Pictures hung on the walls out of focus, distorted blurs instead of faces. In one corner, a small bar cart, a bottle of vodka, half-full, immersed in stout glass cocktail glasses.

Multiple voices grew quiet as Parker entered the room. A group of women were laying comfortably around the fire. Her mother in an armchair, nursing her drink with two hands, weak-wristed and meek. Her grandmother, whom she had never met, but recognized from her mother's picture albums, spread across the carpet, comfortable, confident. She held her glass with one hand and was sweeping her hand through the air when she stopped mid-sentence to acknowledge the intruder. The last woman Parker only knew from one picture, an obituary in the

basement of her mother's house, bulbous red cheeks and a contemplative downturned mouth. As if the muscles in her face for smiling were weak, malnourished. Her innocent eyes wandered, overwhelmed.

Their faces matched their photographs, youthful, younger than Parker herself.

"Hi, there." Her grandmother, from the carpet, smiled at her with a mischievous glint in her eye.

"Parker." Parker's mother shifted in her seat. She placed the glass in her hand on the ground and sat up straight in her seat, a familiar pleading in her eyes.

"Mom?" Parker stepped into the cabin and when she glanced backwards the door was shut, although she hadn't closed it.

"Bernie," her grandmother said, pointing to herself. "Robbie," she continued, pointing to the woman in the corner. "God, she looks just like you, Michelle."

Robbie tried to smile at her, but her lips quivered, miniscule, quietly happy.

"What's going on?" Parker asked.

"We wanted to talk." Bernie propped herself up on an arm.

Robbie watched her with focused eyes, every tiny movement of her hands, the facial muscles of her cheek, down her hips, to her bare feet.

"A little late for that, don't you think? Where the hell have you all been?" Parker grew indignant.

"Ease up," Bernie said with her mouth around her drink. She poured it back, and Parker watched the liquid fall into her mouth. When she pulled the bottle away there was the same amount of drink in her glass.

“We were trying to figure it out. We didn’t have all the pieces until you came along. And since my mom can’t talk, we had to figure out a way to get them.”

“I think we figured out what he wants.” Mitchie’s voice came from low in her throat.

Parker's throat burned. “So, he’s the same for you?”

Mitchie nodded her head slowly.

*Crazy, psychotic, mental.*

“You weren’t.” Parker’s voice cracked. “I mean, you didn’t belong in that hospital.”

“No.” Mitchie replied.

“We should have helped you.”

Mitchie shook her head. “No.”

Parker wanted to collapse to her knees, but instead she slowly lowered herself to the floor at her mother’s feet. Mitchie put a hand through her hair, gently, like she was washing it.

“Who is he?” Parker asked.

“My dad.” Bernie sipped her drink, her fingers pressed against the glass. “Her husband,” she continued, gesturing to Robbie.

Robbie remained stoic; her eyes trained on them all. Her mouth closed shut. Mitchie reached across the space and placed a hand on her knee. Robbie’s body stiffened. Parker’s heart ached with jealousy.

“She can’t speak,” Mitchie said.

“Why am I here?” Parker turned away from the intimacy.

“Bernie thinks she knows what he wants.”

Outside of the cabin, the distant echo of laughter was closer. Now, it rang out like little bells. The sun had disappeared behind the curtain of the woods.

“It started with Mitch. When she burned those stupid little knick knacks of his. Obviously it didn’t stop him, but he was furious. But it isn’t an object holding him here. It isn’t the house, it isn’t anything material. He doesn’t seem to have any attachment, and he can show up anywhere right?”

Parker nodded, dread lodged in her throat.

“Have you heard the music yet?” Bernie asked.

“The jazz?” Parker asked. She hadn’t, but she had heard her mom mumble about it.

Anytime she heard a record scratching vinyl, she flinched.

Mitchie nodded.

“No.”

“‘Porphyria’s Lover.’ The song is called ‘The Yellow Strand.’ It’s about taking possession, making a person into an object for purity and control.”

“I think I’ve read that poem,” Parker replied. In college, they had read “Porphyria’s Lover” in her Introduction to British Literature class.

Parker imagined her mother as Porphyria, sitting next to her lover’s lap, without hands, only a voice. Her mother wrapping her hair around her own throat, loose, yet every day getting tighter against her throat, until there were lacerations. Until it squeezed her trachea. Until she slowly closed her eyes, and her hair loosened around her shoulders, swept back by gray hands, gentle across her pale neck.

“He can’t touch anyone,” Bernie said. “Except us.”

“And animals,” Mitchie continued.

“We think it has something to do with his connection to creatures that have died around him, or maybe what he’s had a hand in killing.”

“He’s dead though, how could he have killed you?”

“Not us,” Bernie replied.

Robbie’s face strayed to the fireplace.

“You’re how we figured it out,” Bernie said.

Robbie started to fidget in the corner. Her fidgeting sporadic, spasmic. She turned her head, her eyes twitched, her leg bounced.

“Because you aren’t continuing the blood line.” Mitchie said.

“Because of Annie.”

Robbie nodded her head, clenching her eyes shut. Her head bobbed, up and down, up, and down.

“He isn’t after you this time.” Mitchie grabbed her hand. “He’s after that baby. He needs you alive until you have your own.

“No more blood. Nothing to tie him here anymore,” Bernie said.

“So, then what? I have a baby and he kills me? Or he kills the baby I’m about to have until I do have one?” Parker raised her voice. “What makes him so different from all those other ghosts? Because there’s no way he is just here to fuck with us? That can’t be it.”

“Cruelty is simple, Parker.”

“But people are not. Memories are not. They’re more than just playbacks. He is more than just a playback, right? He is a memory that wants something.”

Mitchie nodded, shushing Parker. She stroked her face, her hair, her hands.

At the window, a flurry of movement streaked by. A small pack of girls ran across the field of the cabin, doing cartwheels, laughing, and running.

“Who are they?” Parker yelled although she hadn’t meant to.

Bernie shrugged, the neck of her shirt shifting, exposing a bruise.

“They’ve always been here. They never come inside,” Mitchie said.

Bernie, took a cigarette from her shirt, walked to the fire and lit it inside the fire. She took a long drag. It didn’t smell.

Parker examined the girls outside, the pink in their cheeks, the vitality to their movements, free of fear, free of time. The idea of girls running around in the wilderness together was an affront to everything Parker knew to be true, that everywhere there was danger.

“What am I going to do?” Parker asked.

“This can end two ways, with both of you, or with one of you dead,” Bernie said matter-of-factly. She stared at the fire, a hardness in her back, a dearth to her voice.

Robbie stood, moved over to sit next to Parker on the floor, all four of them close enough to touch. Robbie grabbed Parker’s hand, but Parker could not feel it.

“We’ll be here, waiting for you,” Mitchie said, tears forming in her eyes.

“What will you do while you wait?” Parker choked out.

“We watch. It’s what we’ve always done.”

“I watched Sam find my body,” Bernie said.

“I watched you grow up,” Mitchie said.

Robbie stared at the girls lingering outside, lying flat in the green grass, gazes fixed on the sky, a plane sailing overhead.

## Chapter 34: Mitchie, 1990

Mitchie's cheekbones could cut bone. Her room sweltered with the summer warmth. Yesterday, she rearranged her vanity so the mirror no longer faced the bare table where her radio was. The large vanity could hold in its mirror not only Mitchie's body, but the closet behind her in its entirety. She fiddled with her lipsticks, back and forth, side to side.

Mitchie had never been herself, always someone else. Someone she was not made to be. It was why her own mom never loved her. She was an alien. Displaced from her body, displaced from every place she'd ever been in.

"Mom!" Parker yelled from downstairs. A bag hit the floor and the door slammed shut.

"Mitch?" Rex called up the stairs. She closed her eyes tight, pressed into them with her fingers.

Parker ran up the stairs, taking two at a time.

"Mom?" Parker ran into Mitchie's room, her big dazzle-me-smile on display.

"Hi, honey." The words slid from Mitchie's mouth like mud.

It was quiet in the house, but now there was sound: the wind outside, the creaking of the floors. Mitchie put up wind chimes the day before to warn her of spirits in the house.

"You won't believe the week I had at school." Parker sat on the bed, her legs indenting into the flower covered comforter.

"Where's your father?" Mitchie asked because she heard him, so he should be there. She should be able to see him.

"I'm right here." Rex sloughed up the steps.

"Dereck and Quinn both got in trouble for spilling the soap dispensers on the floor. They caught them in the gym locker room."

Rex poked his head into her room, just out of sight.

“Jesus, Mitchie.” He walked up to her, stepping around Mitchie’s body like a horse about to kick him. “Have you been eating?”

She nodded, although she had not. She could not remember the last thing she ate

Rex whispered something to Parker, then went back down the stairs.

Parker was so different from Mitchie. Her spine stood straight, while Mitchie’s curved along, bringing her closer to the floor. Parker animatedly talked. She took on people by force, loving them without their permission, forcing them to love her. Mitchie couldn’t ever be that way. She could not figure out how to force anyone to love her.

“Mom, are you listening?” Parker’s eyes hardened. Resentment grew like mold around her.

Mitchie nodded and hummed.

Parker was strong, like Mitchie’s mother was. Unlike her mother, Parker was vulnerable. Parker was what Mitchie should have been.

“Stop ignoring me,” Parker said.

Mitchie blinked. Parker came into focus, radiating heat.

“Sorry,” she trailed off. The wind chimes from outside tinkled in the distance. Mitchie braced herself.

“I’m great by the way, thanks for asking.” Parker stands up and sneers. The wind chimes get louder, clattering together violently.

“So, that’s it? I move out and I’m not your daughter anymore?” Parker’s voice shakes.

Mitchie doesn't look away from the mirror. A single note drifts its way up the stairs. Lightly, it sways. The saxophone dips. In the window, a shadow passes, disrupting the sunlight flowing in.

"I hope you know I will never, ever forgive you for this. I'm trying and you just..." Parker points a finger at Mitchie, the muscles in Parker's arm clench. "I wasn't born so you could have someone to love you. You should have a kid to love them."

So beautiful, delicate, and angry. If Mitchie could just reach out, if she could touch her, would she desiccate in her fingers? She wouldn't risk what happened to Rex happening to Parker.

"Where is that music coming from?" Parker yelled.

Mitchie twisted in her chair as if she'd been struck. Suddenly, Parker came into focus. "What did you just say?"

Parker walked toward the door.

"Stop," Mitchie yelled, reaching forward.

"What's wrong?" Parker hesitated.

Mitchie turned back, and Leo stood in the mirror, directly behind her. She sucked in a huge breath. Her stomach furled and unfurled.

His eyes were cold, a familiarity settled between them.

"Mitchie," he greeted, his voice lax, dark, raspy.

He had never appeared with Parker in the room before.

"What do you want from me?" Mitchie cried. Without even noticing, tears came to her eyes.

"Mom?"

“She’s beautiful, just like you were.” He broke eye contact, admiring Parker, out of view in the mirror.

Mitchie slammed her fists on the vanity, and he tilted his head back to her. Parker jumped.

He walked slowly, without a sound. He curled his hand over Mitchie’s shoulder, but she couldn’t feel it. Not yet. It hovered there, like in a dream, like something was meant to hurt, but didn’t.

“Everything fades,” he said.

His hand caressed across her cheek. He swiped his fingers, measuring, about to pinch the skin. Mitchie’s skin began to change. At first, it dropped, sloughing off. Then it shriveled, sunk into itself. The hydration left her skin. She became a fossil, someone she did not recognize, without freckles, without eyes.

She shut her eyes tight.

“Open them,” he said.

“Mom, what’s happening?”

Mitchie flung her arm out and smashed the mirror into pieces.

“Jesus!” Parker screamed.

Mitchie opened her eyes, and he was gone, and it was quiet.

“Dad!” Parker sprinted down the stairs.

Mitchie’s hand was bleeding, the skin pulled apart by the shards of the mirror. The tears fell from her eyes, mixing into the blood. Mitchie’s reflection appeared in the shards, small pieces of her face—her real, young, sharp face.

Finally, alone, there was silence. A break in time. A break from what was to come.

## Chapter 35: Bernie, 1957

Today was the day. Bernie tugged at her hair, pulled at her dress, rubbed her face. There was an anticipation to her movements, an eddy curbing her own excitement. The promise of happiness was so often disappointing, Bernie could not help but feel terrified.

Bernie walked about the cabin alone. On the other side of the cabin walls, it was dark. If anyone were to walk through the forest, they would only see the shadows of bodies next to the water. It was dark enough that they would all look like ghosts.

Bernie dropped Mitchie off at her Uncle John's house that morning. Of course she had wanted her there, it was her life that was about to change, too, but Mitchie was young, reckless. When Bernie was in a room with Mitchie she was distracted from everything else, lapsed in time. She could only focus on how small she was. How fragile everything around her was. Today, she would not think of those things. Today, she would think of Sam.

The door opened and Carol slipped through the crack, careful not to open it fully.

"Everything okay?" Carol asked. She was wearing a dark blue dress, her pale skin glowing against it.

Bernie nodded at her.

"Well, you look beautiful, Bernie." Carol tucked a strand of hair behind Bernie's ear. "Makes me want to get married again."

Bernie grabbed onto her hand.

"I'm scared."

Carol grasped her hand right back. She pulled her close, wrapping her up in a light hug, aware of wrinkling Bernie's dress. Carol pulled Bernie's hair to the side so she could rub her hands up and down Bernie's bare back. She rocked them back and forth.

“Come on, Bern. Don’t be a scaredy cat. Sam keeps talking about his runaway bride, and the pastor has already sweat through his suit.”

“He’s nervous,” Bernie replied. “So am I.”

“You’re not wrong for that.” Carol pulled away from her friend. “But we can’t wait for you anymore.”

Carol opened the door to the cabin wide. Bernie slipped out of view, grabbing hard at Carol’s arm. “Stop!”

Carol gave her a warm look from where she stood, a foot taller than Bernie, even in heels. “Bernie, it’s time.”

Bernie grabbed her bouquet from the bookshelf next to the door, holding it tightly to her chest, the flowers being crushed. As she stepped out the door, Carol slapped her butt.

Bernie spun on her, and they locked eyes. One look said thank you. The other said go on, I will be here when you are done. I will be here when you are happy. I will be here until the end.

The heat was humid, muggy, dampening Bernie’s skin the second she stepped onto the porch. Pastor Eric wiped at his bald head with a rag.

Sam stood tall, wearing a brand-new suit. Today he wore no chains from his belt, no hat over his head, no cigarettes in his pocket. He wore a dark gray suit, pin stripe tie, looked handsome. He held his hands in front of him. His eyebrows rose at first sight of Bernie, before a smile broke across his face. “Wow” he mouthed.

Carol had set out the scene perfectly. Miscellaneous empty chairs were set up like the pews of a church—wood ones from the dining room, a cozy rocking chair from the porch, a bench from the wood shed, and a lounge chair. The isle was lined with tea candles and little purple flowers that bloomed all around the lake. At the end of the isle, Sam and Pastor Erik stood

over a dark green blanket, directly in front of the shore. Shadows swirled under the surface of the water.

Bernie took one step from the porch, then another until she was walking down the stairs. Without music, she timed herself to the beats of the forest. The dragonflies skimming the water, the owls calling out in the dark, the sound of twigs snapping.

Carol walked on the other side of the chairs to her seat in the front in the rocking chair.

Sam reached out for Bernie. She took his hand and let out a long breath, taking her place opposite him. Pastor Erik cleared his throat, wiping at the sweat over his lip.

“Let’s get this party started.” He opened his Bible. The leather looked fresh; the crease cracked.

Bernie set her feet, facing Sam head on. As he adjusted his feet, Bernie found herself meeting his movements. He looked in her eyes and she let her shoulders relax.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of God, and in the presence of these witnesses—well, this witness—to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony; which is an honorable estate, instituted of God. It is therefore not to be entered into unadvisedly, but reverently, discreetly, and in the fear of God.”

Pastor Erik met both of their eyes individually, leaning in between Bernie and Sam, as if in warning.

God didn't seem to be this ominous presence in the way this town made Bernie believe he was. God had appeared to Bernie minimally in her life. He was around in her mother’s hands, praying on her knees at the foot of Bernie’s bed. He had been around in the shadows of her father, domineering, holy and straight-laced. In the superstitious town folk, their names carved into the outdated and thrown out baptism pool at the bigger church in town. Bernie had even felt

God once, that time at the bar when she had collapsed. Surely it was God was giving her permission to say goodbye to her dad?

“Now, to be perfectly honest, I’ve never been in these woods. Neither have most of you. Yet, we are all here, and in the right mind I am in now, I don’t think I am scared. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind. That by testing you, he may discern what is the will of God, what is good, and acceptable, and perfect. It seems to me like this right here, right now, is good, acceptable, and perfect, regardless of what this town thinks. And I ask of you all, all three of you, and even myself, what is love if it is not declared amongst two. What is love if not something shared?”

Despite the mix-and-matched chairs, the evaporating lake, the difference in height between Sam and Bernie, there was balance.

“Are you ready to proclaim that foundation of love for one another in the sight of the heavens and this witness?” Pastor Erik closed his Bible.

“Yes,” Sam replied.

Bernie hadn’t ever been happy before, not before Sam. As she looked at him now, he shimmered next to the lake, an apparition. When she looked at him, she thought about what it might be like to lose him, to lose this wonderful life they were building together. It was the same feeling she got when she watched Michelle waddling her way across the carpet. How flimsy this life was, how easy it was to lose your grasp on what was important. It terrified her, and in fear she hardened. She pulled slightly from Sam’s hand. She looked out at the lake.

On the other side was her father. He stood with his hands in his pockets, a disappointed anger on his face. His mouth twitched. Bernie was not scared. She could not see his reflection

against the water. She knew in her heart he was a manifestation of her fear. Everyone leaves. Everything ends.

Sam rubs his hands over hers, tightening his own grip.

“I will give everything you are not willing to. I will walk where you can’t, breathe through your lungs, take from your sickness, and fight away your demons,” he said.

Watching Sam’s bravery, facing straight toward her despite the look of an animal about to run, was what made Bernie grip harder. She pulled Sam into her, close enough their faces almost touched. Usually, when other men came this close to her, she turned from them, but Sam was different.

Sam moved his hand to her lip, pressing down with the pad of his thumb.

Bernie vowed to move past her own fear. She would move her feet, one small step at a time.

*I shook the whole time, but ambled forward, into the closet where my suitcase was. I vowed to move past my own fear. How could he say that to Bernie? That she was limited? I couldn’t imagine it. My clever, smart-assed daughter buried in this house, cooking, cleaning, mourning for a life that she would never even get the opportunity to have, because of Leo. He took me, he had me, and I was his, but nobody owned Bernie. She hadn’t given herself away. She didn’t have to stay in the house. She could do what had never been done before. I shoved clothes into the brand-new, useless suitcase, all my belongings, all that would fit. Trapped as I was, I freed her.*

“Samuel Hart, do you take Bernadette Fields to be your lawfully wedded wife? Will you honor and cherish her; love, trust, and commit to her, through joy and pain, sickness and health, and whatever life may throw at you both, until death do you part?”

“In this moment, and in every one after, until the end, I do.”

“Bernadette Fields, do you take Sam Hart to be your lawfully wedded husband? Will you honor and cherish him; love, trust, and commit to him, through joy and pain, sickness and health, and whatever life may throw at you both, until death do you part?”

“I do.” She did, she did, she did.

A harsh blubber came from behind Bernie. Carol was a loud, ugly crier. Her makeup drained down her face, her mouth weeping small hiccups. Bernie’s eyes started to water in response, she refused to look back at Carol. Bernie would never cry at someone else's wedding, and she was both embarrassed and enamored. Carol, her best friend in the whole world, cried at hers.

“At this time you will exchange rings. The wedding ring is a symbol of binding. A symbol of attachment, and of belonging, not of possession, but of partnership.”

Bernie pulled her ring from where it was wrapped in the bouquet. Sam pulled his from his deep pockets.

Sam slipped the ring onto her finger. If it was real gold Bernie would be surprised, but it was beautiful. It shimmered against the wrinkles of her hand. In turn, she slid her ring onto Sam’s hand, and there was symmetry.

“I am so happy to pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss!” Pastor Erik lifted his hands in the air in praise. Carol immediately began clapping, hard and slow claps, the vibration of the sound echoed across the water.

Sam kissed Bernie, soft and sweet.

Bernie was so profoundly happy, so deeply entertained, she begged God to please not take something from her now.

But there must be reciprocity in this world.

## Chapter 36: Robbie, 1942

Robbie watched Bernie catch ladybugs in the tall grass from the window in the kitchen. The window, covered in dirt and dead bugs made it hard to make out her facial features, but she could see Bernie's mouth moving. She held a small mason jar in her hands, filled with grass and leaves.

Robbie's neck got sore from holding it up, a bad habit she hadn't even realized she developed, but her eyes felt comfortable cast to the ground. Ants walked in a line near her bare feet, some carrying small crumbs of what she assumed was bread. She wondered where they found it, considering she swept yesterday morning.

She bent over and put her hands on the floor in front of them, watching their confused movements, trailing backwards, attempting to move around, unaware of where their invisible line was. She waited for one to climb on top of her hand, to go through instead of around, but they simply bumped into her, bashing their bodies into her hand until they found the end.

Bernie stomped up the front door steps and let the screen door shut behind her.

"Shut that door!" Robbie called out.

She heard Bernie backtrack, her shoes clomping against the floor.

"Mom!" Bernie called through the house, it traveled down the narrow hallway into the kitchen, softer than where it started.

"Yes?" Robbie stood up, careful not to step on the ants.

"My ladybug is in the circus, come look!"

"You come here."

Bernie appeared in the doorway, sweat on her forehead and the scent of a child lingering.

“Look!” Out of breath, Bernie clambored to Robbie, placing her jar on the counter top and licking her lips.

Inside the jar were at least three lady bugs, if not more. They ranged from a light orange to a deep, spotted black red. They crawled over grass stems and one buried itself in the corner of the jar, its legs retracted into itself.

“Watch,” Bernie extracted one of the more active ladybugs, the deep red one.

She placed a stick across the top of the mason jar, making sure it rested in the dead center. Then, she propped the ladybug on the end of the stick.

“Wow,” Robbie said.

Outside the sun was shining down on the tall grass. Leo was in the barn working on a deer he had caught the day before. She could see his shadow in the barn window, moving back and forth, holding onto the different knives he used to skin the animal. She could see the deer hanging from the ceiling in the background.

“He hasn’t even done the trick yet!” Bernie said.

“Sorry,” Robbie said, her eyes cast to the ground.

Bernie’s hand reached out to grab Robbie’s, forcing Robbie’s eyes upward.

“Watch.”

The ladybug moved across the stem, its small legs wrapped around the shaft and pulled itself along. It made it across, turned around, then stopped.

“Wow!” Robbie said. “You’ve got quite the career ahead of you.”

Bernie smiled brightly and said, “that’s not true.”

“What do you mean?”

“Girls can’t do anything. So, I’ll stay here with you and dad forever.”

“Where do you get that idea?” Robbie froze.

Bernie looked at her, as if to say, come on.

“Dad told me. He said that girls aren’t good at things and so they should stick to what they are good at, and the world will be better for it.”

A plane crashing to the ground, a body hung over a tree limb, hovering off a cliff. The pilot's cap dangling from feminine fingers.

“That’s not true.”

Robbie said it over and over in her head. She screamed it in her head. That’s not true. That’s not true. That’s not true.

“Yes, it is. Daddy works.” Bernie let go of Robbie’s hand, demurely looking at her ladybug, focused as it started its trek back across the stem.

“I have to take care of you.”

“Well, I’m going to have to do that too.”

“No you aren’t.”

Bernie nodded her head, “Yes.”

“Stop saying that.”

“It’s true.”

“No it isn’t.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No it isn’t!” Robbie yelled.

Bernie almost dropped the mason jar. Her eyes widened, filling with tears. Robbie didn’t think she had ever raised her voice at her daughter. Even in her own shame, she thought about how good it had felt. She wanted to shake her.

Bernie did not begin to cry, despite her tears. She instead, hugged the mason jar to her chest, looked at her mother with something akin to sympathy, studied her.

Out the window, the barn door opened, Leo fast walked to the house.

“That’s not true,” Robbie repeated.

Bernie didn’t say anything back, she began packing up her ladybugs.

The back door opened.

“What the hell was that?” Leo was covered in sweat, his shirt was soaked with it and covered in deer blood.

“We were playing circus,” Bernie lifted the mason jar to the light.

“Why were we screaming?” Leo asked Robbie.

“Just got too excited,” Robbie replied before Bernie could speak.

Leo snickered, “Well don’t scare me like that.”

Leo rinsed his hands in the sink.

“When’s dinner going to be ready?”

“About an hour.”

Leo nodded. He walked out of the room and Bernie, his little shadow, followed him.

## Chapter 37: Parker, 2006

Parker sat across from the therapist and contemplated making a joke to lighten the mood. The therapist's short, pudgy nose turned up to Parker, her big glasses hung from the edge of her nose. She crossed her legs over one another and did not smile at Parker. The therapist gave her a close-lipped, patient look, and Parker, more than anything else, hated the empty silence.

"I want to go back and see if Mary really did get pregnant by God or if she was a good liar."

"That's not what this is," the therapist said without a crack in her facade.

"Okay." Parker tucked her lips and popped them out.

"EMDR isn't time travel."

"It was a joke."

"Do you make jokes when you are uncomfortable?" The therapist set her pen and paper to the side.

"Also when I'm horny, but you don't need to worry about that," Parker replied.

Again, the therapist didn't laugh.

"Tough crowd."

"Parker, I want to take this seriously."

"I am taking this seriously."

The therapist gave her a quizzical look, but continued. "EMDR is a form of hypnosis. Basically what we do is we send you back in your memories. You re-experience these memories in a way that allows your brain to process them better. In a way where you don't feel stuck in these memories, or your trauma."

"Okay," Parker nods, settling back into the armchair.

“Alright, Parker, are you ready?” The therapist pulled another chair directly in front of Parker and Parker smelled her coffee breathe. It was distracting, but she held her tongue.

“Ready.”

“I want you to go back and forth between these two sticks, imagine a space in which you need to go back to...”

Parker’s eyes went back and forth back and forth, until she was back in front of the house once again, slipping through with ease.

There was danger inside the house. There was danger out of the house.

Everything was still. The trees didn’t move, there were no animals or crickets, everything was frozen.

With the stillness there came a silence. An irritation, without background noise that made the saxophone of the jazz record sing, the notes pull out, the low baritone drawing. Parker faced toward the house. She had heard this song before.

She walked up the stairs once again, her feet hitting the same spots. She hoped her mother was there. She wanted to apologize again. She wanted to beg for forgiveness, for a chance to rewind time.

Something was off. Parker hesitated at the door. In the distance, a barn planted in the backfield rested. The door was not red, but brown, without scratches around the handle. Parker had never been here before. She was not in her own memories.

She twisted the doorknob silently, slowly. It creaked open.

The fireplace roared with too much wood, the smoke billowing into the room, cranking up the heat. Leo held Robbie up by the throat. Their eyes locked on each other. Robbie clawed at his hands, her paltry fingers like the talons of a sparrow.

Parker's first instinct was to rush them. Her feet pushed off the carpet and she swung her arms forward, but neither person changed stance, and there was someone else in the room.

In the doorway to the kitchen, a small girl with a red and blotching face held a crossbow, too big for her body. It rested awkwardly on her shoulder. Her eyes were shut tight, her arms shaking from the weight, from fear.

Parker halted. A switch went off in her mind. Parker shut her eyes, matching the little girl. When she opened them, the arrow was flying across the room. It pierced through Leo's back, traveling straight through him, right into Robbie's heart.

The little girl's eyes were opened wide, watching as the couple fell to the floor. She ran straight toward Parker. Parker reached out, her arms open wide, and the little girl ran straight through them, out the door, into the night.

Parker opened her eyes, and was no longer at the house. This one was different, the cabin she had been to before, but not in her own memory, in her dreams. Now, there was a lake behind her, shimmering still in the moonlight. The forest behind her was darker, covered by an ominous black sky with no stars. There was a thin layer of snow on the ground.

Parker looked around for the little girl, but she was nowhere to be found.

To her right, two rocking chairs were on the porch, empty, waiting.

Parker did not want to go inside, but she did. She had to.

Sam was lying on the floor. He woke up, looked around and did not find what he was looking for. He put on his shirt, wrapping himself tightly. The door was open and there was a chill.

He walked out the door. Parker followed him.

Parker could not feel the chill from outside, but Sam wrapped his arms around himself. His feet padded down the steps, leaving marks in the frost next to other footsteps marked there. The footsteps had iced over, glassy, and smooth on the surface. They led Sam to the ground ahead, leading straight into the forest.

Parker followed Sam as he stepped inside the glass footsteps, picking up speed as the footsteps became more frantic themselves, missing toes, missing the bottom half of a heel. They followed them all the way to the other side of the lake, inside the forest.

“Bern?” Sam called, over and over, to nothing.

On the edge of the lake, a figure lay in the snow, at first Parker thought it was a carcass. Fresh steam was rising from the skin of the body.

Sam took off in a sprint, sliding in the snow and catching himself on the ground with his hands, “Bernie! Bernie, baby!” He collapsed on the ground next to her, sliding hard enough the dirt underneath the ice and snow flew around him.

Parker did not get close enough to hear what he whispered in Bernie’s body’s ear. He checked her pulse. His mouth opened, wailing out into the forest. He raised a hand to his mouth, covering it to stop the sounds from escaping, but they came, pouring out in between his fingers, over the lid of his hand, boiling over.

Parker got closer. A bottle of vodka displayed next to Bernie’s body, on the ground, still mostly full. Hand marks, light as freckles, touched her neck. The rings of thumbprints were ingrained in her skin.

“Baby,” Sam wailed. His mouth wobbled. His tears sunk into the snow.

Parker turned from the scene, embarrassed by what she had already seen. She was too late.

She turned around and stood in an orchard.

Parker had seen the orchard from a distance before. A sign hung above the gate. A cartoon worm eating its way through an apple and exclaiming *Western State Apple Orchard!* Another sign hung below it, hanging slightly off, tattered by wind and rain: *Patients need permission at all times to enter the apple orchard.*

Apples littered the ground, preserved in a state of half-rot because of the cold. The leaves were falling, leaving branches bare and bold. The orchard was empty. Hallways of rotten apples in the dirt weaved in and around the trees. Parker knew what was coming next.

When they called her dad to give him the news, and he had whispered “What?” into the phone, so softly, so bewildered, Parker knew what had happened in an instant. What else could it have been? It was always something with her mom. That much she knew, she had known.

Parker walked through the gate.

Silence, except from her own footsteps. She wasn’t sure if she was hearing her feet crunch on the gravel or if she was imagining it. She walked and walked through the orchard as if it were a maze, always turning back, making sure she could see the gate. The further the entrance got from her the harder her heart beat.

Eventually, she was no longer imagining the sound of crunching, but the sound wasn’t aligning with her own steps. In front of her, in the flesh, was her mom, wrapped loosely in a hospital robe, looking up at the tops of the trees, as if there were apples there. She stopped, and as Parker moved closer, she saw Mitchie was across from the ghost, smiling at him.

Blood rushed into Parker’s ears and plugged them. Parker tried to touch Mitchie’s arm, but the second she reached out, she was too far away. Parker kept walking forward, but that was as close as she was going to get.

Her mom and Leo were talking. She could see their lips moving back and forth, she could see the lingering rage settling behind Leo's lips. Mitchie said something he didn't like. Parker was reminded of the way he looked in that cabin, out of control of himself, shifting in and out of focus. Not the way he had been with Robbie. He had seemed too in control then.

Finally, one of them moved. Leo took a step forward and Mitchie tilted her head, pulled a razor from her sleeve. Parker's mouth opened to scream, to tell her to stop, but that was not how it went. That was not what happened.

Leo also started to scream, moving toward her faster than a regular human could move, but still he was not fast enough. Mitchie took the razor to her arm. Parker closed her eyes.

Parker was back in the office. The therapist sat across from her looking worried, looking like she did not know what had just happened.

Parker gasped, breathing hard, and looked around. She was back. She could feel exactly what her mother had meant, what her mother's mother had meant, what generations told her: Time is kind, it lets us see what they could not, it takes off the blinders and shows the whole picture for what it was.

## Chapter 38: Mitchie, 1994

The nurse left Mitchie's radio on overnight, and in the dawn of the morning, it's static woke her. Her eyes slipped open, wary. Her body, cold. The sheets were wrapped tightly around her, pinning her to the small twin bed. She pushed against them, the tension dissipating in the space between her body and the cloth.

Time passed both quickly and slowly at the hospital. Her days were spent sleeping, trying to spoon food into her mouth, wandering around the grounds. She had a modicum of freedom. She could go to the bathroom on her own, change the television channel, disappear into the yard, eat with a fork and a knife, walk through the orchard.

The apple orchard was a project started ten years ago by a nurse who wanted fresh air for her patients, who recognized how stifling it was between the walls of the asylum and wanted to give the people who wandered the halls a place where they could breathe. Mitchie spent almost all of her time there. She tried to memorize the trees but found herself getting lost, mostly from the drugs they had her on. But it was okay to be lost, because she had nowhere to be. She could wander and wander for hours, feeling winter slip in the gaps of her jacket.

Mitchie slipped out of bed. The hallways were just lighting up with the first signs of the day. Most patients slept in, particularly as winter crept in and the sun hid itself from them. She turned off the radio, the silence gasping into the room. She pulled on her robe.

Nurses walked back and forth to different rooms, checking the zombie-like patients to make sure they were still breathing. Right before Mitchie arrived, a patient had been dead in her room for almost half a day before a nurse finally found her. She had a seizure in her sleep. Now, they made rounds every few hours to make sure that bodies didn't harden before they found them.

Mitchie's room was on the first floor at the end of the hall. She passed every room on her floor as well as the front desk to get to the orchard, but the workers continued to work, and the patients continued to sleep, and she walked out the door.

The fresh air was crisp, a sweet relief from inside the hospital where the heat was turned up three degrees too high as soon as September hit. Mitchie wrapped her robe around her body a little tighter and started her way around the building to the back. Mornings were when her head was at its clearest. It was when she did all of her hard thinking, although it was hard to piece it all together. She caught glimpses—the broken vanity, Rex clutching at his eyes, the puppy's tiny paws reflecting from the pond—but it became harder and harder to picture his face. A few weeks after she had started taking the drugs, he had disappeared, and she hadn't seen him since. As if he never was there. As if Mitchie had done all of it.

She shook her head, but the images came regardless: her fingernails sinking into Rex's eyelids, the puppy flying out of her hands into the wall, the fire in the backyard lighting up the sky, the smoke filtering into her lungs, the tree catching fire, and Parker wailing at her to move.

She arrived at the gate. A small picket fence stood as tall as her hips with a big sign meant to entice the patients, as well as infantilize them—a big cartoon apple being eaten by a wide-eyed worm and the words “Western State Historic Apple Orchard!” The tops of the apple trees stuck out like the tops of lollipops. Long corridors of trees made archways on the footpaths. They bore no fruit, but the ground was covered in rotten apples, sunk into the crevices of the bottoms of Mitchie's shoes.

Mitchie walked, and walked, and walked. Life, the never-ending walk.

What if...? No. What if, though? She really had imagined it all. She had built it up in her head like some kind of maniac? Or schizophrenic? She had met plenty of schizophrenics in her

time at the hospital. They were usually worse for wear. But some of them seemed normal, walking around, talking to people, taking their meds, until they were not. Her doctor said she was having psychotic episodes triggered by never dealing with the death of her own mother. He said this with an air of parental arrogance, loosening his tie and spreading his legs so he could lean back from his desk.

She stopped walking. She couldn't think about that. She pressed the tips of her fingers hard into her closed eyes until stars appeared.

She can remember clawing at Rex's eyes. She can remember smashing her fist through the vanity mirror. She can remember all of it. How insane she must have looked. But the one thing she doesn't remember was picking up that dog. She hadn't ever touched it. It couldn't have been her. She was across the driveway.

Something hits the ground next to her and she jumps away from it, letting a small sound escape her lips that might have been a scream, had she been using her voice more. An apple, full, and hard rolled toward her. It gleamed red in the fog of the morning; a small bite had been taken from it.

The apple was identical to the one she saw yesterday, when Parker and Rex had come to visit her.

Rex had looked around sheepishly, scared of the other patients, and scared of Mitchie. Every week he came, and sometimes they would talk, almost like normal, and sometimes Mitchie would sit across from him, anger bleeding onto the surface of the table, seeping down its legs, and crawling up the walls of the room until they were all suffocating from it.

It was only the second time Parker had come. She was in her second year of college, had gained a few pounds over her first year that had evened out. She walked in, her head held high, her fists balled up, but trying to seem relaxed, like nothing could touch her.

Mitchie tucked her hands into her lap, folding them one over the other, over the other, over the other. They sat across from her.

“You didn’t tell me she was coming,” Mitchie blurted out as they sat. Parker’s eyes flashed with hurt.

“Last minute deal.” Rex rubbed his hand over his head. He had recently shaved his head and Mitchie thought it was ugly. You could see the moles on his head, the odd shape of it, the scars like fishing lines around his eyes.

Parker crossed her arms across her chest.

“We brought you these.” Rex pulled a bag from underneath the table. He slid it over to her.

Mitchie’s hands were shaking. She brought them over the table and reached in pulling out a book, an apple, a pen, and notebook.

“Parker picked out the notebook,” he said.

Mitchie glanced hopefully at Parker who had a sneer on her lips.

“Thank you,” she replied. She grabbed the apple and placed it in front of her on the table. It was a light red, yellow streaks wrapped around it.

“So, how are you, Mitch?” Rex folded his hands. For a moment, she missed him. She missed his hands on the arch of her back. She shook the thought away.

“I’m good. Things are good here.” Around them, other patients were playing ski-ball, nodding off in front of the television set, waiting in line to play checkers because a new set was bought two days ago, a full set with all the pieces.

“That’s good to hear,” Rex said. He nudged Parker with his shoulder who made an angry little noise with her mouth and leaned away.

Mitchie knew she should ask her about college, but she couldn’t bear to ask her any questions. She felt betrayed by Rex, but more so by Parker. Parker had left, gone off to college and was thriving. She had good grades, a few girlfriends (although nothing serious), she had just been nominated to be on student council for clubs. She was out in the world living her life and Mitchie was indignant with the unfairness of it all. She had to give it all up so Parker could be happy, but they were a family. They were supposed to be in it together.

“How’s the house?” Mitchie asked.

Parker scoffed. “I’m fine mom, thanks for asking.”

“Okay, Parker. How are you?”

Parker turned to Rex. “I told you.” Tears welled in her eyes and her voice cracked.

“Park, relax. We just got here.”

“I know you feel like I’m a big disappointment, Parker, but I’m trying here.” Mitchie picked the apple up and placed it in her lap. She dug her nails into the skin.

“How? How are you trying?”

“Alright, fine.” Mitchie threw her hands in the air. “I’m a big failure, that’s it. A terrible mom.”

“Well, I don’t know. What was your mom like?” Parker snapped.

“Cold, distant. She drowned herself in the bottle because I wasn’t worth it to her. You have a nice life, Parker, and that is because I had you.”

“You’re so dramatic. God. You have your pity party on your own. I’ll be in the car.”

Parker had stormed out.

In the orchard, Mitchie picked the apple up from the ground, covered in dirt. It still had the indents from where her nails had pierced through. She turned it in her hands.

“Hi there.”

Leo stood on the other end of the trail, smiling his ghoulish smile.

Mitchie froze. She knew he would be back. He always was.

“Hi,” Mitchie replied.

“Long time, no see.”

Mitchie let the apple fall back to the ground. It rolled behind her. She’d prepared for this moment. After Rex checked her into Western State, she vowed she would not do this again. She’d lost everything, her home, her husband, her daughter. The pills would work for as long as they worked, but Mitchie knew he would be back, he always was. She came prepared.

“I’ve missed you.”

“Tell me what you want from me,” Mitchie said.

Leo laughed, taunting her, “How could I want if I’m not here?”

Mitchie fingered the razor in her robe, pressing the edge to the skin of her thumb.

“It’s not about wanting. I have what I want. It’s about keeping.”

Mitchie gripped the razor in her fingers.

“Not anymore.” Mitchie raised the razor over her arm. He had haunted her long enough. She was taking herself back.

“NO!” Leo rushed her, but it was too late. He could not keep her anymore.

Mitchie slashed her wrists as hard as she could, making sure there was no chance she would be back.

## Chapter 39: Bernie, 1960

The floors heated up in the night, waking Bernie, who realized the fire in the fireplace was blazing. Sam was still asleep next to her, impervious to the heat. Two almost finished bottles of wine next to him. His pain tolerance was inhuman. Bernie had never seen him flinch. She wrapped herself in the sheet, her naked body wet with sweat, and left Sam bare to the world. His breathing didn't change.

She grabbed the fire poker from the wall and moved the wood around, separating it until it was just coals. She didn't know what time it was, but it was late. She couldn't see anything past the first line of trees out the window, only small blips of the stars.

Mitchie was at Carol's house. Carol offered to take her not only as a present to Mitchie, but to Bernie's whose birthday was only a few days after Mitchie's. She was turning 27. A year older than her dad when he died. Something she did not expect for herself.

The wind howled outside; the fire licked up the sides of the fireplace. Suddenly, a breeze blew through a window. A window Bernie was sure she had closed earlier. Maybe Sam had gotten up in the night and instead of fixing the fire, had opened the window for fresh air.

She went to close it, but before she could, she saw a figure standing outside. Her breath caught in her throat. She grasped the fire poker hard, so hard it rolled in her sweaty hand. Sam still lay asleep. The figure was staring straight at the house. No one knew they were out here, no one could hear them if they screamed.

She would defend him, till the end.

Outside, the figure started moving. Bernie's eyes latched onto its bare feet. A scene she recognized quite well, a scene that stopped her in her tracks. The way the feet leaned on their

sides, swaying, small. As it approached, it became clear the figure was a woman, long hair in her face, her arms holding onto herself. For a moment, Bernie thought she was still asleep. She hadn't seen her mother since the day before she died. Her softness, her weak tendons, the way her hands shook. Bernie used to think of it as a weakness. More than that, she looked down on her mother. Her entire life, she took in the fun with her father, making her mother smaller and smaller, before she saw herself as her mother in the years to come.

Her mother didn't come closer, but her hands flitted in front of her, shaking, frantic.

Bernie motioned for her to come closer, but her mother shook her head. Her whole body shaking violently, spasming.

Bernie held up a finger: *Hold on one minute, I'm coming out.*

Bernie got dressed, her own fingers shaking over the buttons of her shirt. She had always, always, always thought about what she wanted to say to her father. That she missed him, that she wished things had been different, that him being gone had changed who she was, who she became. That she hoped he was proud of her. But for some inexplicable reason, she had never, not once, thought about what she would say to her mother. And now, the only words running through her mind were, *I'm sorry.*

She opened the door and the cold slipped through all the spaces in between her shirt and skin. By the time she got onto the porch and looked up, her mother was disappearing into the forest, the edges of her gray dress slick, like water in the night. Bernie took off, an ache in her lungs from the cold.

"Wait!" she said, almost to herself. She didn't want Sam to wake. She trusted Sam with everything. Everything but this—her parents, and the tragedy of their family. Their history

seemed to metamorphize when she talked about it, turning into something sinister, and she didn't want that to break the circle between her and Sam.

“Wait!” Bernie's feet were bare, slipping on rocks and sticks. She ignored the stabbing.

Her mom turned to her, she had never been very quick. Her mom always lost at the games they played.

“Go!” Her mother croaked out, animalistic, guttural.

Bernie stopped in her tracks. Her voice, her voice, her voice.

“Wait, god damnit!”

Her mother ran further, but was forced to stop at the lake, paled as she happened upon Bernie's father, waiting for them. Bernie, who usually saw her father as a sign, a blessing, felt an unease grasp her. Unlike other times Bernie had seen him, when he was cool and smooth, watching over her, now, he feverishly looked between Robbie and Bernie. A strand of hair fell into his face. His pale skin was glowing, clammy.

Robbie moved closer to Bernie, but Leo took a step forward and she went rigid. Instead of continuing toward her, Robbie moved further, on the other side of Leo, until Robbie and Bernie faced each other. The lake was black as the night behind her. Leo turned to Robbie, his mouth moving up and down. Smile, frown, smile, frown.

“Dad?” Bernie settled between them. The three of them pressed into the earth beneath their feet, connected by surface, connected in ways they could not explain.

“I see she finally found you.” He turned to Bernie then, smiling his easygoing smile he usually wore for her. It was off, his eyes refusing to land on any one thing.

“What's going on?”

“Your mother brought you here.”

Robbie's eyes are wide open, opaque.

"Why?"

"Yes, why, Roberta? You want a little family reunion after what you did?"

Robbie stayed silent. She stared at Leo with love, and with shame, and with hatred.

"Guess what, Robbie? She hates you!" Leo shoved a finger at Bernie. "You know what you did? It's more than what you did to me. You took away BOTH of her parents. You think she would have cared if you were gone? You were barely there! But you left her alone."

Bernie couldn't really see, but she swore a small droplet fell from Robbie's face.

"Dad."

"What?" He laughed. "Tell her it's true, Bern. Because of her, you lost everything."

For a moment, all Bernie could do was stare at him. Take in his tallness, the way his body seemed to tower over both of them. His long arms, his mean smile. Robbie was crying, and he was enjoying it.

Bernie nodded at him, determined, before turning to her mother, for the first time.

"Mom," Bernie said.

Robbie looked up abruptly, face wet.

Leo watched eagerly as Bernie began to speak.

"When I was young, I had all these dreams and fears, and everything was the end of the world. As I got older, I realized loss and heartbreak aren't as devastating as I thought they were back when. You meet new people, or dream new dreams, or just continue chasing down what you want. You let things go, and it's so..." Bernie paused to breathe in the lake.

She continued, "...peaceful. I want that in my life. I don't want to make choices I know will ruin that anymore. I found someone I love. I have a little girl myself, and she looks just like

you. It's terrifying. Even the way you used to wash your hands after cooking. What happened was sad for the little girl I was, but I'm not her, and I forgive you."

Leo's lips curl upward in disgust. "All women are the same."

Bernie was taken aback, he had never referred to her in the same context as her mother before. It was always Her and Him. Always on one side of the line, together.

Robbie, or the ghost of Robbie wavered by the lake, her form more solid in the water's surface than on the ground across from Bernie. The lake shimmered with her, and it took away the years on her face. Young again, her face inflated, her eyes opened, she stood tall in that reflection.

Leo's anger flickered through his body, a clenched fist, a deep breath, a violent shake in his chest. Bernie, for the first time since seeing him appear on that dance floor those many years ago, felt he was inhuman. Unnatural in the way he held his body, an intrusion on the natural order of things. He was not meant to be here. He wanted something, and his want was natural, he did not stop wanting, he wanted more.

The lake stilled, and Leo marched towards Bernie.

Strangled and weak, a noise like an owl's screech came from Robbie's closed mouth.

"Dad?" Bernie stepped backwards, gripped tightly in fear. Her brain shoved one way, then the opposite, until it stopped all together.

He advanced on her, stepping on rocks, and snapping branches. The water of the lake shook, rippling, like an earthquake under the surface was making its way to the top, like something large was about to emerge from the water.

Bernie didn't turn from him, but stepped backwards, fast, her feet flying underneath her swiftly. Her bare feet barely registered the dirt and needles poking through her skin. Leo's hands reached out, bigger than she remembered them, the veins purple and deep, the knuckles brutish.

A disruption in the forest erupted, crickets flicked their legs together, frogs blurbed out, chanting, a rising choir, branches snapped from above, bouncing off each other as they made their way to the ground, mollifying into the rest of the forest brush. And in the background, softly, a whisper, or slight of the ear, the soft low B note of a saxophone, growing.

Leo was in her space now. She could practically feel his breath on her, except it wasn't there. There was an absence of it, a paradoxical space meant to hold breath, air, oxygen was instead encapsulated by siphoning of air.

Robbie didn't move away from the lake. She stood there, taller and younger, watching with a look that said: I know what is about to happen, I have been here before. We have lived this moment over and over, and you are the only one who did not know what was to come.

Leo's hands wrapped around Bernie's neck, and she tried to claw them away. Her nails spread even against the absence of a thing. His hands were hard and knotted on her neck, but her own hands had no effect on them.

"Stop," she said, though her voice wavers as he presses down on her esophagus.

He didn't. If anything, he pressed harder, harder, harder. He crushed her neck in his hands, and she didn't stand a chance. Her face purpled.

Bernie and Robbie locked eyes over him. Robbie's eyes said she was sorry. They said, for what you have lost, there is no apology I can give that will be good enough.

And Bernie, she stopped clawing at nothing. She wavered in her body. She pictured her little girl walking barefoot through those woods. Woods that used to be hers and her fathers. But

they weren't his woods anymore, they were hers, they were Sam's, they would be Michelle's. She poured all her thoughts into her heart, where Sam rested, sleeping still in front of the fire. She was thankful she had that, so thankful the air welled in her chest, broke from her mouth, one last exhale into the fresh air.

## Chapter 40: Robbie/Bernie, 1942

Today would be the last day.

Robbie removed herself from the bathroom, leaving in it a letter for Leo, written in her small, scrawled letters, telling him she was leaving, and she was taking Bernie with her. In the garbage was the first version of the letter, torn to pieces. If he were to open the trash, piece each section back together, it would read that Robbie hated him, that he was evil and cruel. And she meant that, but she had ripped up the letter and thrown it in the trash, because although she meant it, she also did not.

Bernie moved around upstairs. Robbie sat in the living room, in Leo's armchair, bulky and overbearing. Its wood legs scraped into the floors, leaving little white scar marks. She had filled the tub in the bathroom with water in hopes it would buy them some time. If he thought she was getting Bernie ready for bed, he wouldn't interrupt them. Their nighttime routine was one of the few times Leo wasn't lingering around a corner or watching them from another room. Robbie felt safe in the bathroom.

Robbie watched the ceiling, thinking about her daughter, and how she could convince her to leave. Bernie loved her father, that much was apparent. Robbie felt she had a small window of opportunity. For one second, Leo had revealed himself, screaming at Robbie while Bernie was in the backseat of the car. He pressed a palm to the glass to reveal the truth, and Bernie had been witness. The line had been blurred, and Robbie had an opportunity to step over and pull Bernie out, and that was what she planned to do.

Her own bags were packed. Nothing much: a small suitcase of clothing, two books (*The Myth of Sisyphus* and *West With the Night*), a straw hat she used sometimes in the garden, and a

pack of letters between Leo and her before things had turned downhill to remind her, so she wouldn't forget that there was a before this, that there could be an after.

Robbie took in the house. There was little in it that reminded her of herself. When she lived with her parents she could remember the warmth of their house. It held living, breathing life like a container. Inside of it, memories of fresh baked meals and bare feet running through the halls. Inside of her and Leo's house, there were dark corners. It seemed there were never any lights on and the windows in the kitchen were covered by green curtains. The light hit the floor and ran up halfway the wall, but stopped, unable to touch anyone's face except Bernie's.

Bernie's feet brusquely clambered down the stairs. Her hand barely held on to the railing. Her cheek was smudged with dirt.

"Bernie, come here." Robbie gripped the arms of the chair and tried to stand, but her knees shook.

"Why?" Bernie stopped in the doorway.

Robbie's cheek was tender from a slap she received after they got home the night Leo yelled in front of Bernie. Bernie stared long and hard at it, a look of confusion on her face.

"I need to talk to you." Robbie's voice cracked.

Bernie took one step back and shook her head, a creature unable to comprehend the big world she was being forced into.

"Come here," Robbie spoke softly, reaching out her hand, and Bernie stepped toward her and grasped it, lightly as if she might hurt her.

"Mom?" Bernie started to cry. Her other hand reached forward, touched her mother's cheek lightly, like it was paper.

"We have to go, okay?" Robbie closed her eyes at the touch. It disappeared.

“Go where?”

“We need to leave. We can’t stay here.”

Bernie’s face warped with anger, disgust painted across her lips, her grip on her mother tightened.

“Why not?”

“Because soon it won’t just be me. I can’t save you unless we leave.”

Bernie’s eyes darted back and forth, back, and forth. Her hand did not tighten anymore. Robbie begged her not to ask questions, not to argue, to take her hand, for once, and let her guide her away from all this.

The door opened slowly. Leo carried groceries and a jug of milk. He bent over to grab the rest of his things, then returned to the door to kick it open.

Robbie pulled Bernie’s hand. Tugged her toward the bathroom, and shut the door behind her, holding the knob closed. She felt the knob turning under her hand, but Bernie didn’t say a word.

“What the hell?” Leo was staring at the suitcase. He put down the groceries and picked up the straw hat in his hand.

“Hi, honey.” Robbie smiled at him, quivering like a leaf in the wind.

“What’s this?”

Robbie felt the doorknob moving, more frantic now. She pulled hard on it and felt the door shake back. Bernie stopped wiggling the door.

Robbie couldn’t think of anything to say. Her lips soldered together.

“Are you going somewhere?” Leo moved into the room and shut the door behind himself. His fist curled around the straw of the hat.

“No,” Robbie replied.

“What is this suitcase doing here, then?”

“I thought we could go on a trip; Bernie is out for the summer so I thought we could take her to the coast.” It wasn’t a lie. The thought had crossed Robbie’s mind before Bernie had seen Leo snap, before he told her she was incapable, before he trapped her. She thought if they could just get away from the house, then Leo could see clearly. They could wish their way back. But Robbie knew there was no going back. She watched Bernie move around Leo instead of with him, and knew she'd made a mistake in thinking things would be different for her daughter.

“Where’s my suitcase, then?” Leo picked the suitcase up and tossed it into the wall as hard as he could. It went through the plaster, knocking a hole the size of a book.

“Hm?” His voice rose. When his voice rose, his cheeks turned a bright, purpled red. His shallow cheeks filled, and his eyes bulged from his head. Red veins popped from his forehead.

“We were waiting for you,” Robbie’s spoke softly, clenching the doorknob shut.

“Where’s Bernie?” Leo yelled up the stairs, summoning her.

The bathroom was quiet in response. Robbie let go of the handle and moved toward Leo. She walked opposite him, around the armchair, toward the fireplace. The fire had just gone out. Its embers still glowed red, the wood disintegrated into gray ash.

“Where is my daughter?” Leo asked again, solidly.

“Upstairs,” Robbie said loud enough for Bernie to hear. Praying she would stay in the bathroom. Robbie took more steps, sidestepping toward the door, hoping that if she got to it first, she would have time to run out. Bernie would have time to sneak out the back or would be smart enough to know she needed to leave.

“Bernie!” He called again and when he was met with silence, he threw the hat to the ground and stamped it under his foot. “What the fuck did you say to her?”

“Nothing.”

“She always answers when I call. What. Did. You. Say?”

When Robbie didn’t answer, Leo rushed toward her, brushing past her without touching her. Robbie covered her face and moved swiftly to the side. Her shoulder collided into the doorway. Leo stormed up the stairs, and Robbie willed herself to move.

His footsteps beat like drums throughout the house. His fury disrupted the stillness. It raged through the rest of the house, trembling beneath the floorboards and animalistically thrashing up the fireplace before settling once again, like a fly against a windowpane, when he reached the top of the stairs.

Robbie pushed herself off the wall and opened the bathroom door, turning the knob slowly so as not to make a noise. Bernie was sitting on the edge of the tub looking small and scared. Her hands were twisting themselves in her lap. She was not crying, but her eyes were red. Robbie waved her over and Bernie flew into her stomach, wrapping her arms around her waist. Robbie thought she might tip over.

She carried Bernie to the back door, her toes leveraging the floorboards. A door slammed upstairs.

“You have to go hide,” Robbie whispered in Bernie’s ear. She smelled like dirt.

“No.” Bernie clutched her tighter. Robbie twisted the doorknob and opened it to the outside. A ferocious wind blew. It was November and mini whirlwinds of raked leaves turned over themselves in the air. Behind them, the trees roared as the wind tried to make its way

through the forest. The grass of the field was yellow and dead. In the distance, the barn door shuddered against its metal hinge, making a screeching sound.

“Go to the barn.” Robbie pried Bernie’s arms from around her neck.

“Mom,” Bernie cried, and her wet tears soaked into Robbie’s shirt.

“Bernie!” Leo screamed from upstairs, and Robbie jumped.

“Go, please, go.” Robbie pushed her out the door, shutting it behind her just as Leo’s footsteps pounded down the stairs.

Robbie ran back into the living room from the kitchen and met Leo’s eyes at the bottom of the stairs.

He didn’t say anything more. In fact, Robbie would never hear his voice again.

Robbie moved toward the front door, seeing if she could make it, if she just moved fast enough.

But Robbie, her calloused feet and all, did not make it.

Leo grabbed her arm and dragged her into the bathroom. His eyes wild, wide, protruding from his reddened face. He forced her onto her knees in front of the tub and grabbed her by the hair. He forced her under the water before she could even take a breath. Robbie tugged at his hand and peeled back his skin with her nails, but his hand was too large. He didn’t budge. He held her there until her eyes blacked, then pulled her back up.

He left her on the floor of the bathroom and paced to the kitchen, to the living room, to the wall where he kept his bows, his knives, his hunting gear. Back into the living room.

Robbie stood up, following him into the living room. Robbie had decided, this was the end. Whether or not he killed her. Whether or not. She would stand and face him. They would be the same again.

Leo moved on her, grabbing her arms and pulling her over by the fire, to the wall where they kept their wedding rings when they washed the car, where a movie ticket from one of their first dates had browned and curled, where Leo left her flowers. He grasped her neck in his hand, her feet lifted off the ground. It was all she could do but grab onto his fingers and try to leverage herself up to open her airway. Robbie was so glad, nearly relieved, it was almost over. That finally she could be done.

But Bernie would not be done. Bernie realized halfway down the stairs, in the end, it wasn't loyalty to her mother that wrenched her back in the house. In fact, she resented her mother for her weakness. It was that her father was not who she thought he was. How could he hurt something so weak? So, when she turned and ran back into the house it wasn't her mother she came for, it was her father.

"This is the last fucking time, Roberta," Leo whispered in her ear. Droplets soaked into the shoulder of his shirt from her wet hair.

Robbie's throat made a sound, a bubble. She had not tried hard enough, and now, Bernie would be stuck with Leo. And without someone underneath his foot, Leo was not Leo, but a shell, someone that could have been happy had he needed less.

Robbie's vision was spotting. Soon, she would be dead.

Leo licked his lips. Robbie saw black.

Then the pressure fell away from her throat as Leo lurched forward, a gasp pushed from his chest.

Behind him, Bernie had taken the crossbow from where Leo had left it on the back porch. She loaded it, as Leo had taught her to do. She pointed it at Leo, but her hands had shaken, and her eyes clouded with tears. And because she could not aim, she closed her eyes as she pulled the

trigger, opening them once again to watch as the arrow went directly through Leo's heart.

Because Leo lined up perfectly, inhumanly, coincidentally so with Robbie's body, the arrow had gone straight through Leo into Robbie's own heart. Piercing the plump muscle just enough.

There would be no hope for her.

Leo's eyes blinked rapidly. His mouth opened like a clasp popped. He stared at Robbie with fury, his eyes reflected in the fire, orange, black. Robbie grasped his arm as if they were going to embrace.

Her time had come, and she was taking him with her, and she could live with that. She could die with that.

Leo pushed off of her, taking the arrow with him.

Robbie fell to the floor. The blood in her heart flooded into her chest.

She looked around for Bernie, but realized she must have run, snuck out the back door. Leo collapsed down next to her. He clutched at the arrow, as if he were going to pull it out himself.

In her last moment, a moment where she felt weak, she said, "I hate you."

Then she grabbed onto his hand because she was scared. He grabbed back. Leo clasped his fingers to hers. And Robbie watched betrayal flood his eyes, maybe from Bernie, maybe from Robbie's omission.

She laid on the floor, and knew what she said was true, but it also was not.

## Chapter 41: Parker, 2006

Parker had taken on burdens that were not hers to take. She whispered it to herself: You are better than them. You can stop this.

She willed herself to dream of the cabin again. She pressed her head back into the pillow tightly, clenching her eyes until she saw stars.

She thought about the finger moving back and forth, back, and forth.

Suddenly, she was in front of the cabin once again. The sun was going down over a car haphazardly parked in the driveway. The same scene she had seen last time. The front door propped open.

This time, Parker walked right into the house. The scene displayed in front of her: Robbie clawing at Leo's hands around her throat. Her legs dangling in the air. The back door leading from the kitchen cracked open. Bernie wriggling her body inside, carrying the crossbow under her arm.

Parker ignored Robbie. She ignored Leo. She walked past them, a ghost.

Parker stepped in front of the doorway to the kitchen, blocking Bernie from her path.

Bernie looked right up at her, confusion marring her features. The crossbow loosened from her grasp, and she grabbed at it, tucking it close to her body.

Parker didn't say anything. She merely took the crossbow from Bernie's arms. She set the machine up on the counter. Bernie padded toward the other room. Parker shook her head at her.

Bernie's eyes brimmed with tears.

Parker took her by the shoulders, turned her around and pushed her toward the kitchen door. A silent promise that she would end this, that Bernie didn't need to watch.

As soon as Bernie's body disappeared, Parker took the crossbow once more. She jammed it into her shoulder socket.

When she entered the living room again, Robbie's face was turning purple. Parker loaded the bow, springing back the mechanism, aiming right for Leo's back.

Just as she was about to pull the trigger, Leo spun his head around, still holding Robbie.

"No!" He cried, his mouth opening wider and wider, without solid form, but Parker had already released the trigger. Leo was already dead by the time he reached her.

Parker dropped the cross bow and walked out the front door, leaving the bodies of her ancestors to die by the fire.

Women were waiting for her when she walked out of the house. Lined up, staggered individually, standing, backs straight and tall, like soldiers lined for war. Her mom, Bernie, Robbie all waited for her there.

Leo stood at the bottom of the stairs, surrounded by them, his hands displayed out in front of the women, clean and bare.

Leo did not look at Parker as if she had defeated him, but instead looked at Robbie, standing in front of Mitchie and Bernie. Her paltry stance did not hide her from his gaze. Hair fell into her face, her arms wrapped around herself. She made eye contact with him and stood taller, the wind brushed the hair away from her eyes.

Leo nodded his head at her. It was over.

Behind him, the horizon shimmered, rain bounced off the ground into the air. Slowly, bodies started to rise. One after the other, shimmering legs appeared, bodies curved and muscled arms, calloused hands. Necks that held burdens and faces that knew violence. Facing each other, away from the Fields women, these women take in one another, their scars, burns, bashed-in

skulls, their mangled limbs. They stand tall, side by side. From overhead, creating a tapestry that weaved together to create a quilt, a story.